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THE DEFINITE OBJECT

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THE DEFINITE OBJECT

By Jeffery Farnol

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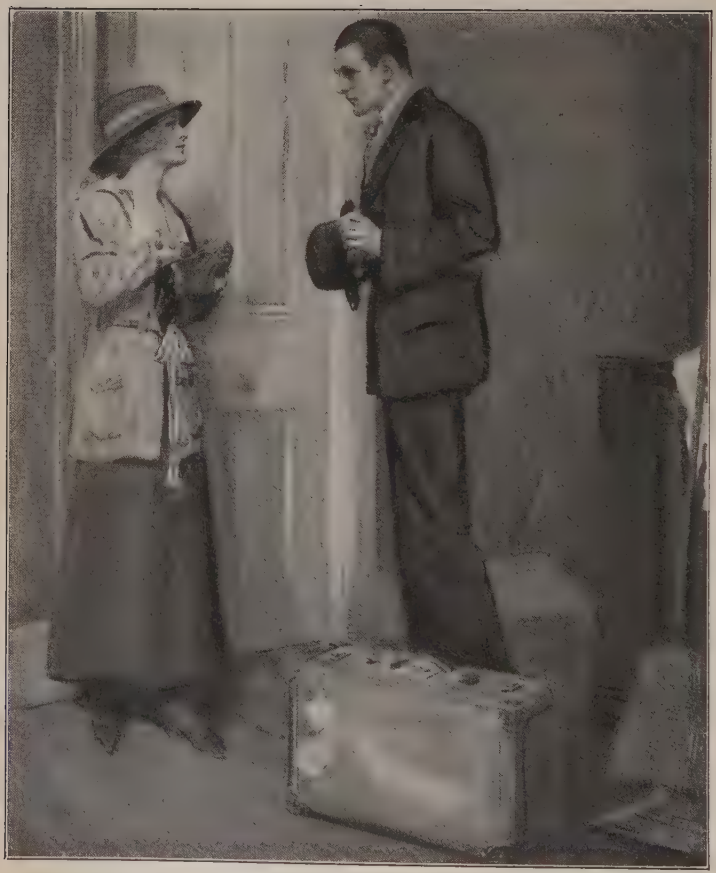
The Definite Object



"You didn't tell me your name!" said she, fumbling in a well-worn little hand bag for her latchkey.

FRONTISPIECE. *See page 58.*

THE DEFINITE OBJECT

A Romance of New York

BY

JEFFERY FARNOL

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

F. VAUX WILSON

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THE DEFINITE OBJECT

CHAPTER I

WHICH DESCRIBES, AMONG OTHER THINGS, A PAIR OF WHISKERS

In the writing of books, as all the world knows, two things are above all other things essential — the one is to know exactly when and where to leave off, and the other to be equally certain when and where to begin.

Now this book, naturally enough, begins with Mr. Brimberly's whiskers; begins at that moment when he coughed and pulled down his waistcoat for the first time. And yet (since action is as necessary to the success of a book as to life itself) it should perhaps begin more properly at the psychological moment when Mr. Brimberly coughed and pulled down the garment aforesaid for the third time, since it is then that the real action of this story commences.

Be that as it may, it is beyond all question that nowhere in this wide world could there possibly be found just such another pair of whiskers as those which adorned the plump cheeks of Mr. Brimberly; without them he might have been only an ordinary man, but, possessing them, he was the very incarnation of all that a butler could possibly be.

And what whiskers these were! So soft, so fleecy, so purely white, that at times they almost seemed like the wings of cherubim, striving to soar away and bear Mr. Brimberly into a higher and purer sphere. Again, what Protean whiskers were these, whose fleecy pomposity could overawe the most superior young footmen and reduce page-boys, tradesmen, and the lower orders generally, to

a state of perspiring humility; to his equals how calmly aloof, how blandly dignified; and to those a misguided fate had set above him, how demurely deferential, how obligingly obsequious! Indeed, Mr. Brimberly's whiskers were all things to all men, and therein lay their potency.

Mr. Brimberly then, pompous, affable, and most sedate, having motioned his visitor into his master's favourite chair, set down the tray of decanters and glasses upon the piano, coughed, and pulled down his waistcoat; and Mr. Brimberly did it all with that air of portentous dignity and leisurely solemnity which, together with his whiskers, made him the personality he was.

"And you 're still valeting for Barberton, are you, Mr. Stevens?" he blandly enquired.

"I 've been with his lordship six months, now," nodded Mr. Stevens.

"Ah!" said Mr. Brimberly, opening a certain carved cabinet and reaching thence a box of his master's choicest Havanas, "six months, indeed! And 'ow is Barberton? I hacted in the capacity of his confidential valet a good many years ago, as I told you, and we always got on very well together, very well, indèed. 'Ow is Barberton?"

"Oh, 'e 'd be right enough if it war n't for 'is gout which gets 'im in the big toe now and then, and 'is duns and creditors and sich-like low fellers, as gets 'im everywhere and constant! 'E 'll never be quite 'imself until 'e marries money — and plenty of it!"

"A American hair-ess!" nodded Mr. Brimberly. "Pre-cisely! I very nearly married 'im to a rich widder ten years ago. 'E 'd 'ave been settled for life if 'e 'd took my advice! But Barberton was always inclined to be a little 'eadstrong. The widder in question 'appened to be a trifle par-say, I 'll admit, also it was 'inted that one of 'er — lower limbs was cork. But then, 'er money, sir — 'er jools!" Mr. Brimberly raised eyes and hands and shook his head until his whiskers quivered in a very ecstasy.

"But a wooden leg —" began Mr. Stevens dubiously.

"I said 'limb', sir!" said Mr. Brimberly, his whiskers distinctly agitated, "a cork limb, sir! And Lord bless me, a cork limb ain't to be sniffed at contemptuous when it brings haffluence with it, sir! At least, my sentiments leans that way."

"Oh — ditto, certainly, sir! I 'd take haffluence to my 'eart if she came with both le — both of 'em cork, if it meant haffluence like this!" Mr. Stevens let his pale, prominent eyes wander slowly around the luxuriant splendour of the room. "My eye!" he exclaimed, "it 's easy to see as your governor don't have to bother about marrying money, cork limbs or otherwise! Very rich, ain't 'e, Mr. Brimberly?"

Mr. Brimberly set down the decanter he chanced to be holding, and having caressed each fluffy whisker, smiled.

"I think, sir," said he gently, "y-es, I think we may answer 'yes' to your latter question. I think we may tell you and admit 'ole-'earted and frank, sir, that the Ravenslee fortune is fab'lous, sir, stoopendious and himmense!"

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Mr. Stevens, and his pale eyes, much wider, now wandered up from the Persian rug beneath his boots to the elaborately carved ceiling above his head. "My aunt!" he murmured.

"Oh, I think we 're fairly comfortable 'ere, sir," nodded Mr. Brimberly complacently, "yes, fairly comfortable, I think."

"Comfortable!" ejaculated the awe-struck Mr. Stevens, "I should say so! My word!"

"Yes," pursued Mr. Brimberly, "comfortable, and I ventur' to think, tasteful, sir, for I 'll admit young Ravenslee — though a millionaire and young — 'as taste. Observe this costly bricky-brack! Oh, yes, young Har is a man of taste indoobitably, I think you must admit."

"Very much so indeed, sir!" answered Mr. Stevens with his pallid glance on the array of bottles. "'Three Star,' I think, Mr. Brimberly?"

"Sir," sighed Mr. Brimberly in gentle reproach, "you 'ere be'old Cognac brandy as could n't be acquired for

twenty-five dollars the bottle! Then 'ere we 'ave jubilee port, a rare old sherry, and whisky. Now what shall we make it? You, being like myself, a Englishman in this 'ere land of eagles, spread and otherwise, suppose we make it a B and a Hess?"

"By all means!" nodded Mr. Stevens.

"I was meditating," said Mr. Brimberly, busied with the bottles and glasses, "I was cogitating calling hup Mr. Jenkins, the Stanways' butler across the way. The Stanways is common people, parvynoo, Mr. Stevens, parvynoo, but Mr. Jenkins is very superior and plays the banjer very affecting. Our 'ousekeeper and the maids is gone to bed, and I 've give our footmen leave of habsence — I thought we might 'ave a nice, quiet musical hour or so. You perform on the piano-forty, I believe, sir?"

"Only very occasional!" Mr. Stevens admitted. "But," and here his pale eyes glanced toward the door, "do I understand as he is out for the night?"

"Sir," said Mr. Brimberly ponderously, "what ''e' might you be pleased to mean?"

"I was merely allooding to — to your governor, sir."

Mr. Brimberly glanced at his guest, set down the glass he was in the act of filling and — pulled down his waistcoat for the second time.

"Sir," said he, and his cherubic whiskers seemed positively to quiver, "I presoom — I say, I presoom you are referring to — Young Har?"

"I meant Mr. Ravenslee."

"Then may I beg that you 'll allood to him 'enceforth as Young Har? This is Young Har's own room, sir. These is Young Har's own picters, sir. When Young Har is absent, I generally sit 'ere with me cigar and observe said picters. I 'm fond of hart, sir; I find hart soothing and restful. The picters surrounding of you are all painted by Young Har's very own 'and — subjeks various. Number one — a windmill very much out o' repair, but that 's hart, sir. Number two — a lady dressed in what I might term dish-a-bell, sir, and there is n't much

of it, but that 's hart again. Number three — a sunset. Number four — moonlight; 'e did n't get the moon in the picter but the light 's there and that 's the great thing — effect, sir, effect! Of course, being only studies, they don't look finished — which is the most hartisticest part about 'em! But, lord! Young Har never finishes anything — too tired! 'Ang me, sir, if I don't think 'e were born tired! But then, 'oo ever knew a haristocrat as was n't?"

"But," demurred Mr. Stevens, staring down into his empty glass, "I thought 'e was a American, your — Young Har?"

"Why, 'e is and 'e ain't, sir. His father was only a American, I 'll confess, but his mother was blue blood, every drop guaranteed, sir, and as truly English as — as I am!"

"And is he the Mr. Ravenslee as is the sportsman? Goes in for boxing, don't 'e? Very much fancied as a heavyweight, ain't 'e? My governor 's seen him box and says 'e 's a perfect snorter, by Jove!"

Mr. Brimberly sighed, and soothed a slightly agitated whisker.

"Why, yes," he admitted, "I 'm afraid 'e does box — but only as a ammitoor, Mr. Stevens, strickly as a ammitoor, understand!"

"And he 's out making a night of it, is he?" enquired Mr. Stevens, leaning back luxuriously and stretching his legs. "Bit of a rip, ain't 'e?"

"A — wot, sir?" enquired Mr. Brimberly with raised brows.

"Well, very wild, ain't he — drinks, gambles, and hetceteras, don't he?"

"Why, as to that, sir," answered Mr. Brimberly, dexterously performing on the syphon, "I should answer you, drink 'e may, gamble 'e do, hetceteras I won't answer for, 'im being the very hacme of respectability though 'e is a millionaire and young."

"And when might you expect 'im back?"

"Why, there 's no telling, Mr. Stevens."

"Eh?" exclaimed Mr. Stevens, and sat up very suddenly.

"'Is movements, sir, is quite — ah — quite metehoric!"

"My eye!" exclaimed Mr. Stevens, gulping his brandy and soda rather hastily.

"Metehoric is the only word for it, sir!" pursued Mr. Brimberly with a slow nod. "'E may drop in on me at any moment, sir!"

"Why, then," said his guest, rising, "p'r'aps I 'd better be moving?"

"On the other 'and," pursued Mr. Brimberly, smiling and caressing his left whisker, "'e may be on 'is way to Hafghanistan or Hasia Minor at this pre-cise moment — 'e is that metehoric, lord! These millionaires is much of a muchness, sir, 'ere to-day, gone to-morrer. Noo York this week, London or Paris the next. Young Har is always upsetting my plans, 'e is, and that 's a fact, sir! Me being a nat'rally quiet, reasonable, and law-abiding character, I objects to youthful millionaires on principle, Mr. Stevens, on principle!"

"Ditto!" nodded Mr. Stevens, his glance wandering uneasily to the door again, "ditto with all my 'eart, sir. If it 's all the same to you, I think p'r'aps I 'd better be hopping — you know — "

"Oh, don't you worry about Young Har; 'e won't bother us to-night; 'e 's off Long Island way to try his newest 'igh-power racing car — 'e 's driving in the Vanderbilt Cup Race next month. To-night 'e expects to do eighty miles or so, and 'opes to sleep at one of 'is clubs. I say 'e 'opes an' expects so to do!"

"Yes," nodded Mr. Stevens, "certainly, but what do you mean?"

"Sir," sighed Mr. Brimberly, "if you 'd been forced by stern dooty to sit be'ind Young Har in a fast automobile as I 'ave, you 'd know what I mean. Reckless? Speed? Well, there!" and Mr. Brimberly lifted hands and eyes and shook his head until his whiskers vibrated with horror.

"Then you 're pretty sure," said Mr. Stevens, settling

luxurious boots upon a cushioned chair, "you 're pretty sure he won't come bobbing up when least expected?"

"Pretty sure!" nodded Mr. Brimberly. "You see, this nooest car is the very latest thing in racing cars — cost a fortune, consequently it 's bound to break down — these here expensive cars always do, believe me!"

"Why, then," said Mr. Stevens, helping himself to one of Mr. Brimberly's master's cigars, "I say let joy and 'armony be unconfined! How about Jenkins and 'is banjer?"

"I 'll call 'im up immediate!" nodded Mr. Brimberly, rising. "Mr. Jenkins is a true hartist, equally facetious and soulful, sir!"

So saying, Mr. Brimberly arose and crossed toward the telephone. But scarcely had he taken three steps when he paused suddenly and stood rigid and motionless, his staring gaze fixed upon the nearest window; for from the shadowy world beyond came a sound, faint as yet and far away, but a sound there was no mistaking — the dismal tooting of an automobile horn.

"'Eavens an' earth!" exclaimed Mr. Brimberly, and crossing to the window he peered out. Once again the horn was heard, but very much nearer now, and louder, whereupon Mr. Brimberly turned, almost hastily, and his visitor rose hurriedly.

"It 's very annoying, Mr. Stevens," said he, "but can I trouble you to — to step — er — down — stairs — *with* the glasses? It 's 'ighly mortifying, but may I ask you to — er — step a little lively, Mr. Stevens?"

Without a word, Mr. Stevens caught up the tray from the piano and glided away on his toe-points; whereupon Mr. Brimberly (being alone) became astonishingly agile and nimble all at once, diving down to straighten a rug here and there, rearranging chairs and tables; he even opened the window and hurled two half-smoked cigars far out into the night; and his eye was as calm, his brow as placid, his cheek as rosy as ever, only his whiskers — those snowy, telltale whiskers, quivered spasmodically, very

much as though endeavouring to do the manifestly impossible and flutter away with Mr. Brimberly altogether; yes, it was all in his whiskers.

Thus did Mr. Brimberly bustle softly to and fro until he paused, all at once, arrested by the sound of a slow, firm step near by. Then Mr. Brimberly coughed, smoothed his winglike whiskers, and — pulled down his waistcoat for the third time. And lo! even as he did so, the door opened, and the hero of this history stood upon the threshold.

CHAPTER II

OF A MOURNFUL MILLIONAIRE WHO LACKED AN OBJECT

Geoffrey Ravenslee was tall and pale and very languid, so languid indeed that the automobile coat he bore across his arm slipped to the floor ere Mr. Brimberly could take it, after which he shed his cap and goggles and dropped them, drew off his gauntlets and dropped them and, crossing to his favourite lounge chair, dropped himself into it, and lay there staring into the fire.

"Ah, Brimberly," he sighed gently, "making a night of it?"

"Why, sir," bowed his butler, "indeed, sir — to tell the truth, sir —"

"You need n't, Brimberly. Excellent cigars you smoke — judging from the smell. May I have one?"

"Sir," said Brimberly, his whiskers slightly agitated, "cigars, sir?"

"In the cabinet, I think," and Mr. Ravenslee motioned feebly with one white hand towards the tall, carved cabinet in an adjacent corner.

Mr. Brimberly coughed softly behind plump fingers.

"The — the key, sir?" he suggested.

"Oh, not at all necessary, Brimberly; the lock is faulty, you know."

"Sir?" said Brimberly, soothing a twitching whisker.

"If you are familiar with the life of the Fourteenth Louis, Brimberly, you will remember that the Grand Monarch hated to be kept waiting — so do I. A cigar — in the cabinet yonder."

With his whiskers in a high state of agitation, Mr. Brimberly laid by the garments he held clutched in one

arm and coming to the cabinet, opened it, and taking thence a box of cigars, very much at random, came back, carrying it rather as though it were a box of highly dangerous explosives, and setting it at his master's elbow, struck a match.

As Mr. Brimberly watched his master select and light his cigar, it chanced that Young R. raised his eyes and looked at him, and to be sure those eyes were surprisingly piercing and quick for one so very languid. Indeed, Mr. Brimberly seemed to think so, for he coughed again, faint and discreetly, behind his hand, while his whiskers quivered slightly, though perceptibly.

"You 're 'ome quite — quite unexpected, sir!"

"Brimberly, I 'm afraid I am, but I hope I don't intrude?"

"Intrude, sir!" repeated Mr. Brimberly. "Oh, very facetious, sir, very facetious indeed!" and he laughed, deferentially and soft.

"I blew the horn, but I see he left his hat behind him!" sighed Young R., nodding languidly toward the headgear of Mr. Stevens, which had fallen beneath a chair and thus escaped notice.

"Why, I — indeed, sir," said Mr. Brimberly, stooping to make a fierce clutch at it, "I took the liberty of showing a friend of mine your — your picters, sir — no offence, I 'ope, sir?"

"Friend?" murmured his master.

"Name of Stevens, sir, valet to Lord Barberton — a most sooperior person indeed, sir!"

"Barberton? I don't agree with you, Brimberly."

"Stevens, sir!"

"Ah! And you showed him my — pictures, did you?"

"Yes, sir, I did take that liberty — no offence, sir, I —"

"Hum! Did he like 'em?"

"Like them, sir! 'E were fair overpowered, sir! Brandy and soda, sir?"

"Thanks! Did he like that, too?"

"Why, sir — I — indeed — "

"Oh, never mind — to-night is an occasion, anyway — just a splash of soda! Yes, Brimberly, when the clocks strike midnight I shall be thirty-five years old — "

"Indeed, sir!" exclaimed Brimberly, clasping his plump hands softly and bowing, "then allow me to wish you many, many 'appy returns, sir, with continued 'ealth, wealth, and all 'appiness, sir!"

"Happiness?" repeated Young R., and smiled quite bitterly, as only the truly young can smile. "Happiness!" said he again, "thank you, Brimberly — now take your friend his hat, and have the extreme goodness to make up the fire for me. I love a fire, as you know, but especially when I am mournful. And pray — hurry, Brimberly!"

Forthwith Mr. Brimberly bowed and bustled out, but very soon bustled in again; and now, as he stooped, menial-like, to ply the coal tongs, though his domelike brow preserved all its wonted serenity, no words could possibly express all the mute rebellion of those eloquent whiskers.

"Hanything more, sir?" he enquired, as he rose from his knees.

"Why, yes," said Young R., glancing up at him, and beneath the quizzical look in those sleepy grey eyes, Mr. Brimberly's whiskers wilted slightly. "You 're getting a trifle too — er — portly to hop round on your knees, are n't you, Brimberly? Pray sit down and talk to me."

Mr. Brimberly bowed and took a chair, sitting very upright and attentive while his master frowned into the fire.

"Thirty-five is a ripe age, Brimberly!" said he at last; "a man should have made something of his life — at thirty-five!"

"Certingly, sir!"

"And I 'm getting quite into the sere and yellow leaf, am I not, Brimberly?"

Mr. Brimberly raised a plump, protesting hand.

"'Ardly that, sir, 'ardly that!" said he, "we are hall of us getting on, of course —"

"Where to, Brimberly? On where, Brimberly — on what?"

"Why, sir, since you ask me, I should answer — begging your parding — 'eavens knows, sir!"

"Precisely! Anyway, I 'm going there fast."

"Where, sir?"

"Heaven knows, Brimberly."

"Ah — er — certingly, sir!"

"Now, Brimberly, as a hard-headed, matter-of-fact, common-sense being, what would you suggest for a poor devil who is sick and tired of everything and most of all — of himself?"

"Why, sir, I should prescribe for that man change of hair, sir — travel, sir. I should suggest to that man Hafghanistan or Hasia Minor, or both, sir. There 's your noo yacht a-laying in the river, sir —"

His master leant his square chin upon his square fist and still frowning at the fire, gently shook his head.

"My good Brimberly," he sighed, "have n't I travelled in most parts of the world?"

"Why, yes, sir, you 've travelled, sir, very much so indeed, sir — you 've shot lions and tigers and a helephant or so, and exchanged sentiments with raging 'eathen — as rage in nothing but a string o' beads — but what about your noomerous possessions in Europe, sir?"

"Ah, yes," nodded Young R., "I do possess some shanties and things over there, don't I, Brimberly?"

"Shanties, sir!" Mr. Brimberly blinked, and his whiskers bristled in horrified reproof. "Shanties! — Oh, dear me, sir!" he murmured. "Shanties — your magnificent town mansion situate in Saint James's Square, London, as your respected father hacquired from a royal dook, sir! Shanties! — your costly and helegant res-eye-dence in Park Lane, sir!"

"Hum!" said Young R. moodily.

"Then, in Scotland, sir, we 'ave your castle of Drum-

lochie, sir — rocks, turrets, battlements, 'ighly grim and romantic, sir!"

"Ha!" sighed his young master, frowning at his cigar.

"Next, sir, — in Italy we find your ancient Roman villa, sir — halabaster pillows and columns, sir — very historical though a trifle wore with wars and centuries of centoorians, sir, wherefore I would humbly suggest a coat or two of paint, sir, applied beneath your very own eye, sir — "

"No, Brimberly," murmured Young R., "paint might have attractions — Italy, none!"

"Certingly not, sir, cer-tingly not! Which brings us to your schloss in Germany, sir — "

"Nor Germany! Lord, Brimberly, are there many more?"

"Ho, yes, sir, plenty!" nodded Mr. Brimberly, "your late honoured and respected father, sir, were a rare 'and at buying palaces, sir; 'e collected 'em, as you might say, like some folks collects postage starmps, sir!"

"And a collection of the one is about as useless as a collection of the other, Brimberly!"

"Why, true, sir, one man can't live in a dozen places all at once, but why not work round 'em in turn, beginning, say, at your imposing Venetian palazzo — canals, sir, gondoleers — picturesque though dampish? Or your shally in the Tyro-leen Halps, sir, or — "

"Brimberly, have the goodness to — er — shut up!"

"Certingly, sir."

"To-day is my birthday, Brimberly, and to-night I 've reached a kind of 'jumping off' place in my life, and — between you and me — I 'm seriously thinking of — er — jumping off!"

"I crave parding, sir?"

"I 'm thirty-five years old," continued Young R., his frown growing blacker, "and I 've never done anything really worth while in all my useless life! Have the goodness to look at me, will you?"

"With pleasure, sir!"

"Well, what do I look like?"

"The very hacme of a gentleman, sir!"

"Kind of you, Brimberly, but I know myself for an absolutely useless thing — a purposeless, ambitionless wretch, drifting on to God knows what. I 'm a hopeless wreck, a moral derelict, and it has only occurred to me to-night — but" — and here the speaker paused to flick the ash from his cigar — "I fear I 'm boring you?"

"No, sir — ho, no, not at all, indeed, sir!"

"You 're very kind, Brimberly — light a cigarette! Ah, no, pardon me, you prefer my cigars, I know."

"Why — why, sir —" stammered Mr. Brimberly, laying a soothing hand upon his twitching whisker, "indeed, I — I —"

"Oh — help yourself, pray!"

Hereupon Mr. Brimberly took a cigar very much at random, and, while Young R. watched with lazy interest, proceeded to cut it — though with singularly clumsy fingers.

"A light, Mr. Brimberly — allow me!"

So Ravenslee held the light while Mr. Brimberly puffed his cigar to a glow, though to be sure he coughed once and choked, as he met Young R.'s calm grey eye.

"Now," pursued his master, "if you 're quite comfortable, Mr. Brimberly, perhaps you 'll be good enough to — er — hearken further to my tale of woe?"

Mr. Brimberly choked again and recovering, smoothed his writhing whiskers and murmured: "It would be a honour!"

"First, then, Brimberly, have you ever hated yourself — I mean, despised yourself so utterly and thoroughly that the bare idea of your existence makes you angry and indignant?"

"Why — no, sir," answered Mr. Brimberly, staring, "I can't say as I 'ave, sir."

"No," said his master with another keen glance, "and I don't suppose you ever will!" Now here again, perhaps because of the look or something in Young R.'s tone,

Mr. Brimberly took occasion to emit a small, apologetic cough.

"You have never felt yourself to be a — cumberer of the earth, Brimberly?"

Mr. Brimberly, having thought the matter over, decided that he had not.

"You are not given to introspection, Brimberly?"

"Intro — ahem! No, sir, not precisely — 'ardly that, sir, and then only very occasional, sir!"

"Then you 've never got on to yourself — got wise to yourself — seen yourself as you really are?"

Mr. Brimberly goggled and groped for his whisker.

"I mean," pursued his master, "you have never seen all your secret weaknesses and petty meannesses stripped stark naked, have you?"

"N-naked, sir!" faltered Mr. Brimberly, "very distressing indeed, sir — oh, dear me!"

"It 's a devilish unpleasant thing," continued Young R., scowling at the fire again, "yes, it 's a devilish unpleasant thing to go serenely on our flowery way, pitying and condemning the sins and follies of others and sublimely unconscious of our own until one day — ah, yes — one day we meet Ourselves face to face and see beneath all our pitiful shams and hypocrisies and know ourselves at last for what we really are — behold the decay of faculties, the degeneration of intellect bred of sloth and inanition and know ourselves at last — for exactly what we are!"

Mr. Brimberly stared at the preoccupation of his master's scowling brow and grim-set mouth, and, clutching a soft handful of whisker, murmured: "Certingly, sir!"

"When I was a boy," continued Ravenslee absently, "I used to dream of the wonderful things I would do when I was a man — by the way, you 're quite sure I 'm not boring you — ?"

"No, sir — certingly not, sir — indeed, sir!"

"Take another cigar, Brimberly — oh, put it in your pocket, it will do to — er — to add to your collection! But, as I was saying, as a boy I was full of a godlike am-

bition — but, as I grew up, ambition and all the noble things it leads to, sickened and died — died of a surfeit of dollars! And to-day I am thirty-five and feel that I can't — that I never shall — do anything worth while — "

"But, sir," exclaimed Mr. Brimberly with a bland and reassuring smile, "you are one as don't have to do nothing — you 're rich!"

Mr. Ravenslee started.

"Rich!" he cried, and turning, he glanced at Mr. Brimberly, and his square chin looked so very square and his grey eyes so very piercing that Mr. Brimberly, loosing his whisker, coughed again and shifted his gaze to the Persian rug beneath his feet; yet when Young R. spoke again, his voice was very soft and sleepy.

"Rich!" he repeated, "yes, that 's just the unspeakable hell of it — it 's money that has crippled all endeavours and made me what I am! Rich? I 'm so rich that my friends are all acquaintances — so rich that I might buy anything in the world except what I most desire — so rich that I am tired of life, the world, and everything in the world, and have been seriously considering a — er — a radical change. It is a comfort to know that we may all of us find oblivion when we so desire."

"Oblivion!" nodded Mr. Brimberly, mouthing the word sonorously, "oblivion, sir, certingly — my own sentiments exactly, sir — for, though not being a marrying man myself, sir, I regard it with a truly reverent heye and 'umbly suggest that for you such a oblivious change would be — "

"Brimberly," said Young R., turning to stare in lazy wonder, "where in the world are you getting to now?"

Mr. Brimberly coughed and touched a whisker with dubious finger.

"Was n't you allooding to — hem! — to matrimony, sir?"

"Matrimony! Lord, no! Hardly so desperate a course as that, Brimberly. I was considering the advisability of — er — this!" And opening a drawer in the escritoire, Young R. held up a revolver, whereat Mr. Brimberly's

whiskers showed immediate signs of extreme agitation, and he started to his feet.

"Mr. Ravenslee, sir — for the love o' Gawd!" he exclaimed, "if it 's a choice between the two — try matrimony first, it 's so much — so much wholesomer, sir!"

"Is it, Brimberly? Let me see, there are about five hundred highly dignified matrons in this — er — great city, wholly eager and anxious to wed their daughters to my dollars (and incidentally myself) even if I were the vilest knave or most pitiful piece of doddering antiquity — faugh! Let 's hear no more of matrimony."

"Certingly not, sir!" bowed Mr. Brimberly.

"And I 'm neither mad, Brimberly, nor drunk, only — speaking colloquially — I 'm 'on to' myself at last. If my father had only left me fewer millions, I might have been quite a hard-working, useful member of society, for there 's good in me, Brimberly. I am occasionally aware of quite noble impulses, but they need some object to bring 'em out. An object — hum!" Here Mr. Ravenslee put away the revolver. "An object to work for, live for, be worthy of!" Here he fell to frowning into the fire again and stared thus so long that at last Mr. Brimberly felt impelled to say:

"A hobject, of course, sir! A hobject — certingly, sir!" But here he started and turned to stare toward the windows as from the darkness beyond two voices were uplifted in song; two voices these which sang the same tune and words but in two different keys, uncertain voices, now shooting up into heights, now dropping into unplumbable deeps, two shaky voices whose inconsequent quaverings suggested four legs in much the same condition.

"Brimberly," sighed his master, "what doleful wretches have we here?"

"Why, sir, I — I rather fancy it 's William and James — the footmen, sir," answered Mr. Brimberly between bristling whiskers. "Hexcuse me, sir — I 'll go and speak to 'em, sir — "

"Oh, pray don't trouble yourself, Mr. Brimberly; sit

down and hearken! These sad sounds are inspired by deep potations — beer, I fancy. Be seated, Mr. Brimberly."

Mr. Brimberly obeyed, and being much agitated dropped his cigar and grovelled for it, and it was to be noted thereafter that as the singers drew nearer, he shuffled on his chair with whiskers violently a-twitch, while his eyes goggled more and his domelike brow grew ever moister. But on came the singing footmen and passed full-tongued, wailing out each word with due effect, thus:

"— my sweet 'eart 's — me mother
The best — the dearest — of — 'em all."

"Hum!" murmured Young R., "I admire the sentiment, Brimberly, but the execution leaves something to be desired, perhaps — "

"If you 'll only let me go out to 'em, sir!" groaned Mr. Brimberly, mopping himself with a very large, exceeding white handkerchief, "if you honly will, sir!"

"No, Brimberly, no — it would only distress you, besides — hark! their song is ended, and rather abruptly — I rather fancy they have fallen down the terrace steps."

"And I 'opes," murmured Mr. Brimberly fervently, "I do 'ope as they 've broke their necks!"

"Of course I ought to have gone out and switched on the lights for them," sighed Young R., "but then, you see, I thought they were safe in bed, Brimberly!"

"Why, sir," said Mr. Brimberly, mopping furiously, "I — I ventured to give 'em a hour's leave of habsence, sir; I ventured so to do, sir, because, sir — "

"Because you are of rather a venturesome nature, are n't you, Brimberly?"

"No offence, sir, I 'ope?"

"None at all, Mr. Brimberly — pray calm yourself and — er — take a little brandy."

"Sir?"

"Your glass is under the chair yonder, or is it your friend's?"

Mr. Brimberly goggled toward Mr. Stevens' betraying

glass, picked it up, and sat staring at it in vague and dreamy fashion until, rousing at his master's second bidding, he proceeded to mix brandy and soda, his gaze still profoundly abstracted and his whiskers drooping with an abnormal meekness.

At this juncture a knock sounded at the door, and a chauffeur appeared, looking very smart in his elegant livery; a thick-set man, mightily deep of chest, whose wide shoulders seemed to fill the doorway, and whose long, gorilla-like arms ended in two powerful hands; his jaw was squarely huge, his nose broad and thick, but beneath his beetling brows blinked two of the mildest blue eyes in the world.

"What is it, Joe?"

"And what time will ye be wantin' the car in the mornin', sir?" he enquired.

"The morning, Joe? Who can say what may happen between now and then?"

"Shall I have her round at eleven, sir, or —"

"Eleven will do as well as any other time — let it go at that."

"You was to see your broker, Mr. Anderson, in the morning over them steamship shares, sir."

"Shares, Joe, are a vanity; all is vanity — they weary me. Mr. Brimberly yawns, and you look sleepy — good night, Joe; pleasant dreams."

"Good night, sir!" and touching his right eyebrow, Joe went out, closing the door behind him.

"And now," said Mr. Ravenslee, puffing languidly at his cigar, "referring to the necessary object, there is a chance that it may be found — even yet, Mr. Brimberly!"

"Object, sir," murmured Mr. Brimberly, "found, sir — to be sure, sir."

"Yes; I intend you shall find it for me, Brimberly."

Mr. Brimberly's abstraction gave place to sudden amaze.

"Find it — wot, me, sir? Hexcuse me, sir, but did you say —" Mr. Brimberly actually gaped!

"You, Brimberly, of course!"

"But — but wot kind of a hobject — and where, sir?"

"Really," sighed Young R., "these are quite fool questions for one of your hard-headed common sense! If I knew exactly 'what' and 'where', I'd go and find it myself — at least, I might!"

"But — 'ow in the world, sir — begging your parding I'm sure, but 'ow am I to go a-finding hobjex as I've never seen nor 'eard of?"

"Brimberly, I pass! But if you manage it in — say a week, I'll double your wages and give you a — er — a bonus into the bargain; think it over."

"I — I will, sir — indeed, sir!"

"Very well; you may go."

"Certingly, sir." Mr. Brimberly bowed and crossed to the door but, being there, paused. "Double me wages I think it were, sir, *and* a bonus? Very 'andsome, very 'andsome indeed, sir — thank you, sir." Saying which, Mr. Brimberly bowed himself out, but immediately bowed himself in again.

"Sir," said he, "if you could give me some hidea, sir —"

"Some what?"

"A few 'ints, sir, as to the nature of said hobject — whether animal, mineral, or nooter, sir?"

"Well — perhaps 'animal' might be the more interesting."

"Now — as to gender, sir — masculine shall we say, or shall we make it feminine?"

"Oh — either will do! And yet, since you offer so wide a selection, perhaps — er — feminine —?"

"Very good, sir!"

"And you'd better make it singular number, Brimberly."

"Certingly, sir, much obliged, sir! Will you be wanting me again, sir?"

"Not again, Brimberly."

"Then good night, sir — thank you, sir!" And Mr.

Brimberly went softly forth and closed the door noiselessly behind him.

Being alone, Mr. Ravenslee switched off the lights and sat in the fire-glow.

"Feminine gender, singular number, objective case, governed by the verb — to love — I wonder!"

And he laughed a little bitterly (and very youthfully) as he stared down into the dying fire.

CHAPTER III

HOW GEOFFREY RAVENSLEE WENT SEEKING AN OBJECT

A CLOCK in the hall without struck midnight, but Mr. Ravenslee sat there long after the silvery chime had died away, his chin sunk upon his broad chest, his sombre eyes staring blindly at the fading embers, lost in profound and gloomy meditation. But, all at once, he started and glanced swiftly around toward a certain window, the curtains of which were only partly drawn, and his lounging attitude changed instantly to one of watchful alertness.

As he sat thus, broad shoulders stooped, feet drawn up — poised for swift action, he beheld a light that flashed here and there, that vanished and came again, hovering up and down and to and fro outside the window; wherefore he reached out a long arm in the gloom and silently opened a certain drawer in the escritoire.

Came a soft click, a faint creak, and a breath of cool, fragrant air as the window was cautiously opened, and a shapeless something climbed through, while Mr. Ravenslee sat motionless — waiting.

The flashing light winked again, a small, bright disc that hovered uncertainly and finally steadied upon the carved cabinet in the corner, and the Something crept stealthily thither. A long-drawn, breathless minute and then — the room was flooded with brilliant light, and a figure, kneeling before the cabinet, uttered a strangled cry and leapt up, only to recoil before Mr. Ravenslee's levelled revolver.

A pallid-faced, willowy lad, this, of perhaps seventeen, who, sinking to his knees, threw up an arm across his face, then raised both hands above his head.

"Ah, don't shoot, mister!" he gasped. "Oh, don't shoot — I got me hands up!"

"Stand up!" said Ravenslee grimly, "up with you and shutter that window — you may have friends outside, and I'm taking no chances! Quick — shutter that window, I say."

The lad struggled to his feet and, crossing to the window, fumbled the shutter into place, his ghastly face turning and turning toward the revolver that glittered in such deadly fashion in Mr. Ravenslee's steady hand. At length, the shutters barred, the boy turned, and moistening dry lips, spoke hoarsely and with apparent effort.

"Oh, mister — don't go for to — croak a guy as — as ain't done nothing!"

"You broke into my house!"

"But I — have n't took nothin'!"

"Because I happened to catch you!"

"But — but — oh, sir," stammered the boy, taking off his cap and fumbling with it while he stared wide-eyed at the threatening revolver, "I — I ain't a real thief — cross me heart and hope to die, I ain't! Don't croak me, sir!"

"But why in the world not?" enquired Mr. Ravenslee. "Alone and unaided I have captured a desperate criminal, a bloodthirsty villain — caught him in the very act of burgling a cabinet where I keep my cigars of price — and Mr. Brimberly's, of course! Consequently to — er — croak you is my privilege as a citizen; it's all quite just and proper — really, I ought to croak you, you know."

"I — ain't desprit, mister," the boy pleaded, "I ain't a reg'lar crook; dis is me first try-out — honest it is!"

"But then I prefer to regard you as a deep-dyed desperado — you must be quite — er — sixteen! Consequently it is my duty to croak you on the spot, or hand you over to the police — "

"No, no!" cried the boy, his tremulous hands reached out in a passion of supplication, "not d' cops — don't let

th' p'lice get me. Oh, I never took nothin' from nobody — lemme go! Be a sport and let me beat it, please, sir!"

All Mr. Ravenslee's chronic languor seemed to have returned as, leaning back in the deep-cushioned chair, he regarded this youthful malefactor with sleepy eyes, yet eyes that missed nothing of the boy's quivering earnestness as he continued, breathlessly:

"Oh, I ain't a real crook, I never done nothin' like this before, an' I never will again if — if you 'll only let me chase meself — "

"And now," sighed Mr. Ravenslee, "I 'll trouble you for the 'phone, yonder."

"Are ye goin' to — call in de cops?"

"That is my intention. Give me the 'phone."

"No!" cried the boy, and springing before the telephone he stood there, trembling but defiant.

"Give me that telephone!"

"Not much I won't!"

"Then of course I must shoot you!"

The boy stood with head up-flung and fists tight-clenched; Mr. Ravenslee lounged in his chair with levelled pistol. So they fronted each other — but, all at once, with a sound between a choke and a groan, the lad covered his face.

"Go on!" he whispered hoarsely, "go on — what 's keepin' you? If it 's the cops or croaking, I — I 'd rather croak."

"Why?"

"'Cause if I was ever sent to — prison — it 'ud break her heart, I guess."

"Her heart?" said Mr. Ravenslee, and lowered the pistol.

"Me sister's."

"Ah — so you have a sister?" and Mr. Ravenslee sat up suddenly.

"Lots o' guys has, but there ain't a sister like mine in all N' York — nor nowheres else."

"Who are you? What 's your name?"

"Spike. Me real name 's Arthur, but Arthur sounds

kinder soft an' sissy; nobody don't call me Arthur 'cept her, an' I don't mind her."

"And what 's her name?"

"Hermy — Hermione, sir."

"Hermione — why, that 's Greek! It 's a very beautiful name!"

"Kind of fits her too!" nodded Spike, warming to his theme. "Hermy 's ace-high on the face and figure question! Why, there ain't a swell dame on Fift' Av'ner, nor nowheres else, got anything on Hermy as a looker!"

"And what of your father and mother?"

"Ain't got none — don't remember having none — don't want none; Hermy 's good 'nuff for me."

"Good to you, is she?" enquired Mr. Ravenslee.

"Good t' me!" cried Spike, "good? Well, say — when I think about it I — I gets watery in me lamps, kinder sloppy in me talk, an' all mushy inside! Good t' me? Well, you can just bet on that!"

"And," enquired Mr. Ravenslee sleepily, "are you as good to her?"

Hereupon Spike turned his cap inside out and looked at it thoughtfully. "I — I dunno, mister."

"Ah! perhaps you — make her cry, sometimes?"

Hereupon Spike began to pick at the lining of his cap and finally answered: "Sometimes, I guess."

"Would she cry if she could see you now, I wonder?"

Hereupon Spike began to wring and twist his cap in nervous hands ere he answered: "I — I guess she might, perhaps."

"She must love you a good deal."

At this, Spike twisted his cap into a ball but spoke nothing; seeing which Mr. Ravenslee proceeded.

"You are luckier than I; there is n't a soul in the world to do as much for me."

Spike gulped audibly and, thereafter, sniffed.

"Now suppose," said Mr. Ravenslee, "let us suppose she found out that the brother she loved so much was a — thief?"

Hereupon Spike unrolled his cap and proceeded to rub his eyes with it, and, when at last he spoke, it was in a voice broken by great sobs.

"Say — cut it out — cut it out! I never meant to — to do it. They got me soused — doped me, I think, else I 'd never have done it. I ain't good, but I ain't so rotten bad as — what I seem. I ain't no real crook, but if you wanter croak me for what I done — go ahead! Only don't — don't let d' cops get me, 'cause o' Hermy. If you croak me, she 'll think I got it in a scrap, maybe; so if you wanter plug me, go ahead!"

"But what are you shivering for?"

"I — I 'm just waitin', sir," answered Spike, closing his eyes, "I — I seen a guy shot once!"

Mr. Ravenslee sighed and nodded.

"After all," said he, "I don't think I 'll croak you," and he slipped the revolver into his pocket while Spike watched him in sudden tense eagerness.

"What yer mean to do wi' me?" he asked.

"That 's the question; what shall I do with you? Let me think."

"Say," cried the boy eagerly, "you don't have to do no thinkin' — leave it all to me! It 's de winder for mine; I 'll chase meself quick — "

"No you don't! Sit down — sit down, I say!"

Spike sighed and seated himself on the extreme edge of the chair his captor indicated.

"Won't yer lemme beat it, sir?" he pleaded.

"No, some one else might catch you next time and have the pleasure of — er — croaking you or handing you over to the police — "

"There won't be no next time, sir!" cried Spike eagerly. "I 'll never do it no more — I 'll cut d' whole gang, I 'll give Bud M'Ginnis d' throw-down — on d' dead level I will, if you 'll only let me — "

"Who 's Bud M'Ginnis?"

"Say," exclaimed the boy, staring, "don't yer know that? Why, Bud 's d' main squeeze with d' gang, d' whole

cheese, he is — an' he kind o' thinks I 'm d' candy-kid 'cause he 's stuck on me sister — "

" Ah! " nodded Mr. Ravenslee, frowning a little, " and is she — er — stuck on him? "

" Not so as you could notice it, she ain't! No, she can't see Bud with a pair of opry-glasses, an' he 's a dead game sport, too! Oh, there ain't no flies on Bud, an' nobody can lick him, either; but Hermy don't cotton none, she has n't got no use for him, see? But say — " Spike rose tentatively and looked on his captor with eyes big and supplicating.

" Well, what now? "

" Why, I thought if you was tired of me chewing d' rag and wanted to hit the feathers, I 'd just cop a sneak. See, if you 'll only lemme go, I 'll do d' square thing and get a steady job like Hermy wants me to — honest, I will, sir! Y' see, me sister 's away to-night — she does needleworks for swell folks an' stops with 'em sometimes — so if you 'll only let me beat it, I can skin back an' she 'll never know! Ah! — lemme go, sir! "

" Well then," sighed Mr. Ravenslee, " for her sake I will let you go — wait! I 'll let you go and never speak of your — er — little escapade here, if you will take me with you."

Now at this, Spike gaped and fell back a step.

" Go wi' me — wi' me? " he stammered. " You — go wi' me to Hell's Kitchen — to Mulligan's Dump — you! Say, what kind o' song and dance are you giving me, anyway? Aw — quit yer kiddin', sir! "

" But I mean it."

" On — on d' level? "

" On the level."

" Holy Gee! " and Spike relapsed into wide-eyed, voiceless wonder.

" Is it a go? " enquired Mr. Ravenslee.

" But — but, say — " stammered the boy, glancing from the elegant figure in the chair around the luxurious room and back again, " but you 're a — a — "

"Just a poor, disconsolate, lonely — er — guy!"

"What!" cried Spike, staring around him again, "with all this? Oh, yes, you 're homeless and starving, you are — I don't think!"

"Is it a go?"

"But say — whatcher want to go wi' me for? What 's yer game? Put me wise."

"I am filled with desire to breathe awhile the salubrious air of Hell's Kitchen; will you take me?" Now as he spoke, beholding the boy's staring amaze, Mr. Ravenslee's frowning brows relaxed, his firm, clean-shaven lips quivered, and all at once curved up into a smile of singular sweetness — a smile before which the hopelessness and fear died out of the boy's long-lashed eyes, his whole strained attitude vanished, and he smiled also — though perhaps a little tremulously.

"Will you take me, Spike?"

"You bet I will!" exclaimed the boy, his blue eyes shining, "and I 'll do my best to show you I — I ain't so bad as I — as I seem — an' we 'll shake on it if you like." And Spike advanced with his hand outstretched, then paused, suddenly abashed, and drooping his head, turned away. "I — I forgot," he muttered, "— I 'm — you said I was a — thief!"

"You meant to be!" said Mr. Ravenslee, and rising, he stretched himself and glanced at his watch.

"Are you coming wi' me, sir?" enquired Spike, regarding Mr. Ravenslee's length and breadth with quick, appraising eyes.

"I surely am!"

"But — but not in them glad rags!" and Spike pointed to Mr. Ravenslee's exquisitely tailored garments.

"Ah — to be sure!" nodded their wearer. "We 'll soon fix that," and he touched the electric bell.

"Say," cried Spike, starting forward in sudden terror, "you — you ain't goin' to give me away?"

"No."

"Cross your heart — hope to die, you ain't?"

"Across my heart and hope to die, I 'm not — and there 's my hand on it, Spike."

"What?" exclaimed the boy, his eyes suspiciously bright, "d' you mean you will shake — after — after what I — "

"There 's my hand, Spike!" So their hands met and gripped, the boy's hot and eagerly tremulous, the man's cool and steady and strong; then of a sudden Spike choked and turning his back brushed away his tears with his cap. Also at this moment, with a soft and discreet knock, Mr. Brimberly opened the door and bowed himself into the room; his attitude was deferential as always, his smile as respectful, but, beholding Spike, his round eyes grew rounder and his whiskers slightly bristly.

"Ah, Brimberly," nodded his master, "you are not in bed yet — good!"

"No, sir," answered Mr. Brimberly, "I 'm not in bed yet, sir, but when you rang I was in the very hact, sir — "

"First of all," said Young R., selecting a cigar, "let me introduce you to — er — my friend, Spike!"

Hereupon Mr. Brimberly rolled his eyes in Spike's direction, glanced him over, touched either whisker, and bowed — and lo! those fleecy whiskers were now eloquent of pompous dignity, beholding which Spike shuffled his feet, averted his eyes, and twisted his cap into a very tight ball indeed.

But now Brimberly turned his eyes (and his whiskers) on his master, who had taken out his watch.

"Brimberly," said he, "it is now very nearly two o'clock."

"Very late, sir — oh, very late, sir — indeed, I was in the very hact of goin' to bed, sir — I 'd even unbuttoned my waistcoat, sir, when you rang — two o'clock, sir — dear me, a most un-'oly hour, sir — "

"Consequently, Brimberly, I am thinking of taking a little outing — "

"Certingly, sir — oh, certingly!"

"And I want some other clothes — "

"Clothes, sir — yessir. There 's the noo 'arris tweed, sir — "

"With holes in them, if possible, Brimberly."

"'Oles, sir! Beg parding, sir, but did you say 'oles, sir? "

"Also patches, Brimberly, the bigger the better! "

"Patches! Hexcuse me, sir, but — patches! I beg parding, but — " Mr. Brimberly laid a feeble hand upon a twitching whisker.

"In a word, Brimberly," pursued his master, seating himself upon the escritoire and swinging his leg, "I want some old clothes, shabby clothes — moth-eaten, stained, battered, and torn. Also a muffler and an old hat. Can you find me some? "

"No, sir, I don't — that is, yessir, I do. Hexcuse me, sir — 'arf a moment, sir." Saying which, Mr. Brimberly bowed and went from the room with one hand still clutching his whisker very much as though he had taken himself into custody and were leading himself out.

"Say," exclaimed Spike in a hoarse whisper and edging nearer to Mr. Ravenslee, "who 's His Whiskers — de swell guy with d' face trimmings? "

"Why, since you ask, Spike, he is a very worthy person who devotes his life to — er — looking after my welfare and — other things."

"Holy Gee! " exclaimed Spike, staring, "I should have thought you was big 'nuff to do that fer yourself, unless — " and here he broke off suddenly and gazed on Mr. Ravenslee's long figure with a new and more particular interest.

"Unless what? "

"Say — you ain't got bats in your belfry, have you — you ain't weak in the think-box, or soft in the nut, are ye? "

"No — at least not more than the average, I believe."

"I mean His Whiskers don't have to lead you around on a string or watch out you don't set fire to yourself, does he? "

"Well, strictly speaking, I can't say that his duties are quite so far-reaching."

"Who are you, anyway?"

"Well, my names are Geoffrey, Guy, Eustace, Hughson — and — er — a few others, but these will do to go on with, perhaps?"

"Well, I guess yes!"

"You can take your choice."

"Well, Guy won't do — no siree — ye see every mutt 's a guy down our way — so I guess we 'll make it Geoff. But, say, if you ain't weak on the think-machinery, why d' ye keep a guy like His Whiskers hanging around?"

"Because he has become a habit, Spike — and habits cling — and speaking of habits — here it is!" Sure enough, at that moment Brimberly's knuckles made themselves discreetly heard, and Brimberly himself appeared with divers garments across his arm, at sight of which Spike stood immediately dumb in staring, awe-struck wonder.

"Ah, you 've got them, Brimberly?"

"Yessir! These is the best I can do, sir — "

"Say rather — the worst!"

"'Ere 's a nice, big 'ole in the coat, sir," said Mr. Brimberly, unfolding the garment in question, "and the weskit, sir; the pocket is tore, you 'll notice, sir."

"Excellent, Brimberly!"

"As for these trousis, sir — "

"They seem rather superior garments, I 'm afraid!" said Mr. Ravenslee, shaking his head.

"But you 'll notice as they 're very much wore round the 'eels, sir."

"They 'll do. Now the hat and muffler."

"All 'ere, sir — the 'at 's got its brim broke, sir."

"Could n't be better, Brimberly!" So saying, Mr. Ravenslee took up the clothes and turned toward the door. "Now I 'll trouble you to keep an eye on — er — young America here while I get into these."

"Sir," said Mr. Brimberly, turning his whiskers full

upon Spike, who immediately fell to shuffling and wringing at his cap. "Sir — I will, certingly, sir."

Now when the door had shut after his master, Mr. Brimberly raised eyes and hands to the ceiling and shook his head until his whiskers quivered. Quoth he: "Hall I arsks is — wot next!" Thereafter he lowered his eyes and regarded Spike as if he had been that basest of base minions — a boy in buttons. At last he deigned speech.

"And w'en did *you* come in, pray?"

"'Bout a hour ago, sir," answered Spike, dropping his cap in his embarrassment.

"Ah!" nodded Mr. Brimberly, "about a hour ago — ho! By appointment, I pre-zoom?"

"No, sir — by a winder."

"A — wot?"

"A winder, sir."

"A — winder? 'Eavens and earth — a winder — ow? Where? Wot for?"

"Say, mister," said Spike, breaking in upon Mr. Brimberly's astounded questioning, "is he nutty?" And he jerked his thumb toward the door through which Mr. Ravenslee had gone.

"Nutty!" said Mr. Brimberly, staring.

"Yes — I mean is he batty? Has he got wheels?"

"W'eels?" said Mr. Brimberly, his eyes rounder than usual.

"Well, then, is he daffy? — off his trolley?"

"Off 'is wot?" said Mr. Brimberly, fumbling for his whisker.

"Holy Gee!" exclaimed Spike, "can't you understand English? Say, is your brother as smart as you?"

"The honly brother as ever I 'ad was a infant as died and — but wot was you saying about a winder?"

"Nothin'!"

"Come, speak up, you young vagabone — " began Mr. Brimberly, his whiskers suddenly fierce and threatening, but just then, fortunately for Spike, the door swung open, and Mr. Ravenslee entered.

And lo! what a change was here! The battered hat, the faded muffler and shabby clothes seemed only to show off all the hitherto hidden strength and vigour of the powerful limbs below; indeed it almost seemed that with his elegant garments he had laid aside his lassitude also and taken on a new air of resolution, for his eyes were sleepy no longer, and his every gesture was lithe and quick. So great was the change that Spike stared speechless, and Mr. Brimberly gaped with whiskers a-droop.

"Well, shall I do?" enquired Mr. Ravenslee, tightening his faded neckerchief.

"Do?" repeated Spike, "say — you look all to d' mustard, Geoff! You — you look as if you could — do things, now!"

"Strangely enough, Spike, I rather feel that way too!" So saying, Mr. Ravenslee took a pipe from the rack, filled it with quick, energetic fingers, and proceeded to light it, watched in dumb amaze by the gaping Brimberly.

"Brimberly," said he, "I shall probably return to-morrow."

"Yes, sir," said he faintly.

"Or the day after."

"Yes, sir!"

"Or the day after."

"Yes, sir!"

"Or the day after that; anyhow, I shall probably return. Should any one call — business or otherwise — tell 'em to call again; say I 'm out of town — you understand?"

"Out of town — certingly, sir."

"Referring to — to the matter we talked of to-night, Brimberly — "

"Meaning the hobject, sir?"

"Precisely! Don't trouble yourself about it."

"No, sir?"

"No, Brimberly — I 'm going to try and find one for myself."

"Ho — very good, sir!"

"And now," said the new Mr. Ravenslee, laying one white, ringless hand on Spike's shoulder and pointing toward the open door with the other, "lead on — young Destiny!"

CHAPTER IV

TELLING HOW HE CAME TO HELL'S KITCHEN AT PEEP O' DAY

It was past three o'clock and dawn was at hand as, by devious ways, Spike piloted his companion through that section of New York City which is known to the initiated as "Hell's Kitchen." By dismal streets they went, past silent, squalid houses and tall tenements looming grim and ghostly in the faint light; crossing broad avenues very silent and deserted at this hour, on and on until, dark and vague and mysterious, the great river flowed before them only to be lost again as they plunged into a gloomy court where tall buildings rose on every hand, huge and very silent, teeming with life — but life just now wrapped in that profound quietude of sleep which is so much akin to death. Into one of these tall tenement buildings, its ugliness rendered more ugly by the network of iron fire-escape ladders that writhed up the face of it, Spike led the way, first into a dark hallway and thence up many stairs that echoed to their light-treading feet — on and up, past dimly lit landings where were doors each of which shut in its own little world, a world distinct and separate wherein youth and age, good and evil, joy and misery, lived and moved and had their being; behind these dingy panels were smiling hope and black despair, blooming health and pallid sickness, and all those sins and virtues that go to make up the sum total of humanity.

Something of all this was in Geoffrey Ravenslee's mind as he climbed the dingy, interminable stair behind Spike, who presently halted to get his wind and whisper:

"It ain't much further now, Geoff, only another two

flights and — " He stopped suddenly to listen, and from the landing above a sound reached them, a sound soft but unmistakable — a woman's muffled sobbing.

Slowly, cautiously, they mounted the stair until in the dim light of a certain landing they beheld a slim figure bowed upon its knees in an agony of abasement before a scarred and dingy door. Even as they stared, the slender, girlish figure sobbed again, and, with a sudden, yearning gesture, lifted a face, pale in the half-light, and kissed that battered door; thereafter, weeping still, she rose to her feet and turned, but seeing Spike, stood very still all at once and with hands clasped tight together.

" Holy Gee! " exclaimed Spike beneath his breath; then, in a hoarse whisper: " Is that Maggie — Maggie Finlay? "

" Oh — is that you, Arthur? " she whispered back. " Arthur — oh, Arthur, I, I 'm going away, but I could n't go without coming to — to kiss dear mother good-by — and now I 'm here I dare n't knock for fear of — father. I 've been up to your door and knocked, but Hermy 's away, I guess. Anyway, you — you 'll say I came to thank her and — kiss her for the last time, won't you, Arthur? "

" Sure I will — but where ye goin', Maggie? "

" A long way, Arthur! I don't s'pose I shall ever — see this place any more — or you — so, Arthur, will you — kiss me good-by — just once? "

Spike hesitated, but she, quick and light-treading, came down to him and caught his hand and would have kissed that, but he snatched it away and, leaning forward, kissed her tear-stained cheek, and blushed thereafter despite the dark.

" Good-by, Arthur! " she whispered, " and thank you — and dear Hermy — oh, good-by! " So saying, she hurried on past Ravenslee, down the dark stairway, while Spike leaned over the balustrade to whisper:

" Good-by, Maggie — an' good luck, Kid! " At this she paused to look up at him with great, sad eyes — a long,

wistful look, then, speaking no more, hurried on down the stair — down, down into the shadows, and was gone.

"We used to go to school together, Geoff," the boy explained a little self-consciously, "she never — kissed me before; she ain't the kissin' sort. I wonder why she did it to-night? I wonder — "

So saying, Spike turned and led the way on again until they reached the landing above, across which two doors, dark and unlovely, seemed to scowl upon each other. One of these Spike proceeded to open with a latchkey, and so led Ravenslee into the dark void beyond. Spike struck a match and lighted the gas, and, looking about him, Ravenslee stared.

A little, cramped room, sparsely furnished yet dainty and homelike, for the small, deal table hid its bare nakedness beneath a dainty cloth; the two rickety armchairs veiled their faded tapestry under chintz covers, cunningly contrived and delicately tinted to match the cheap but soft-toned drugget on the floor and the self-coloured paper on the walls, where hung two or three inexpensive reproductions of famous paintings; and in all things there breathed an air of refinement wholly unexpected in Hell's Kitchen. Wherefore Mr. Ravenslee, observing all things with his quick glance, felt an ever-growing wonder. But now Spike, who had been clattering plates and dishes in the kitchen hard by, thrust his head around the door to say:

"Oh, Geoff — I don't feel like doin' the shut-eye business, d' you? How about a cup of coffee, an' I daresay I might dig out some eats; what d' ye say?"

"Is this — your sister?" enquired Mr. Ravenslee, taking up a photograph from the little sideboard.

"Yep, that 's Hermy all right — taken las' year — does her hair different now. How about some coffee, Geoff?"

"Coffee?" said Mr. Ravenslee, staring at the picture, "coffee — certainly — er — thanks! She has — light hair, Spike?"

"Gold!" said Spike, and vanished; whereupon Mr. Ravenslee laid the photograph on the table, and sitting down, fell to viewing it intently.

A wonderful face, low-browed, deep-eyed, full-lipped. Here was none of smiling prettiness, for these eyes were grave and thoughtful, these lips, despite their soft, voluptuous curves, were firmly modelled like the rounded chin below, and, in all the face, despite its vivid youth, was a vague and wistful sadness.

"Oh, Geoff," called Spike, "d' ye mind having yer coffee à la milko condenso?"

"Milk?" exclaimed Mr. Ravenslee, starting. "Oh — yes — anything will do!"

"Why, hello!" exclaimed Spike, reappearing with a cup and saucer, "still piping off Hermy's photo, Geoff?"

"I 'm wondering why she looks so sad?"

"Sad?" repeated Spike, setting down the crockery with a rattle, "Hermy ain't sad; she always looks like that. Y' see, she ain't much on the giggle, Geoff, but she 's most always singing, 'cept when her kids is sick or Mulligan calls — "

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, Hermy mothers all the kids around here when they 're sick, an' lots o' kids is always getting sick. And when Mulligan comes it 's rent day, an' sometimes Hermy 's a bit shy on the money — "

"Is she?" said Mr. Ravenslee, frowning.

"You bet she is, Geoff! An' Mulligan 's an Irishman an' mean — say, he 's the meanest mutt you ever see. A Jew 's mean, so 's a Chink, but a mean Harp 's got 'em both skinned 'way to 'Frisco an' back again! Why, Mulligan 's that mean he would n't cough up a nickel to see the Statue o' Liberty do a Salomy dance in d' bay. So when the mazuma 's shy Hermy worries some — "

"Don't you help her?" demanded Mr. Ravenslee.

"Help her — why, y' see, Geoff, I — I ain't in a steady job yet. But I do my best an' — why, there 's d' kettle boilin' at last!" saying which, Spike turned and vanished

again, leaving Mr. Ravenslee still staring down at the pictured face. Presently he sank back in his chair, and, lolling thus, looked sleepily at the opposite wall but saw it not, nor heard the clatter of cups and saucers from the kitchen accompanied by Spike's windy whistling; and, as he lounged thus, he spoke softly, and to himself.

"An object!" he murmured.

"Hey, Geoff," Spike called, "this ain't goin' to be no à la carte, hock an' claret feedin' match, nor yet no table-de-hoty eat-fest, but if you can do in some bacon an' eggs, you 're on!"

"Why, then," said Mr. Ravenslee, rising and yawning, "count me decidedly 'on.'"

"Then d 'you mind givin' me a hand wid d' coffee?"

"Delighted!" and forthwith Mr. Ravenslee stepped out into the kitchen; and there, in a while, upon a rickety table covered with a greasy newspaper, they ate and drank with great relish and gusto, insomuch that Mr. Ravenslee marvelled at his own appetite.

"Say, Geoff," enquired Spike as hunger waned, "how long are you stoppin' at Mulligan's — a week?"

"A week — a month — six months," replied his guest sleepily. "It 's all according — "

"Accordin' to what?"

"Well — er — circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"Circumstances over which I have no control — yet!"

"You don't mean me?" queried Spike, with an anxious expression.

"Lord, no!"

"And you 'll never tell nobody that I — that I — "

"Meant to be — a thief?" drawled Mr. Ravenslee. "Not a word!"

Spike flushed, took a gulp of coffee, choked, and fell to sulky silence, while Mr. Ravenslee filled his pipe and yawned.

"Say," demanded Spike at last, "where 'll you live while you 're here?"

"Oh — somewhere, I suppose; I haven't bothered about where yet."

"Well, I been thinkin' I know where I can fix you up — perhaps!"

"Very kind of you, Spike!"

"There 's Mrs. Trapes 'cross d' landing; she lost her lodger last week — mean guy skinned off without paying d' rent — she might take you."

"Across the landing? She 'll do!" nodded Mr. Ravenslee.

"But I 'm wonderin' if *you 'll* do; she 's a holy terror when she likes, Geoff."

"Across the landing? I 'll put up with her!" murmured Mr. Ravenslee.

"But, say, you don't know Mrs. Trapes."

"Not yet, Spike."

"Well, she ain't no easy mark, Geoff! Most everybody in Mulligan's is scared of her when she cuts loose; she can talk ye deaf, dumb an' paralysed, she can so. She sure is aces up on d' chin-music, Geoff!"

"But then she lives just opposite, and that circumstance, methinks, doth cover a multitude of —" Mr. Ravenslee yawned again.

"Anyway, it 's a sure thing she won't take you if she don't like ye, Geoff."

"Why, then, she must like me!" said Mr. Ravenslee and proceeded to light his pipe; whereupon Spike produced a box of cigarettes, but, in the act of lighting one, paused, and sighing, put it away again.

"I promised d' Spider I would n't, Geoff," he explained. "Y' see, I 'm sort of in trainin', and Spider says smoke 's bad for d' wind, and d' Spider knows."

"Spider?" said Mr. Ravenslee, glancing up, "do you mean Spider Connolly the lightweight?"

"That 's d' guy!" nodded Spike.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Sure! Him an' Bud M'Ginnis is goin' to get me some good matches soon."

"Boxing matches?"

"That 's what they call 'em, Geoff — but there ain't much boxin' to it; real boxin' don't go down wid d' sports, it 's d' punch they wanter see — good, stiff wallops as jars a guy an' makes his knees get wobbly — swings and jolts as makes a guy blind an' deaf an' sick. Oh, I been like that, an' I know — an' it ain't all candy t' hear everybody yellin' to the other guy to go in an' finish ye!"

"Does your sister know you fight?"

"Not much, she don't! I guess she 'd like me to be a mommer's pet in lace collars an' a velvet suit, an' soft an' pretty in me talk. She 's made me promise t' cut out d' tough-spiel, an' so I 'm tryin' to — "

"Are you really, Spike?"

"Well — when she 's around I do, Geoff!"

"And she does n't like you to fight, eh?"

"Nope! But y' see — she 's only a girl, Geoff!"

"And that 's the wonder of it!" nodded Mr. Ravenslee.

"Wonder? What d' ye mean?"

"I mean that all these years she has managed to feed you, and clothe you, and keep a comfortable home for you, and she 's — only a girl!"

"Well, and ain't I tryin' to make good?" cried the boy eagerly.

"Are you really, Spike?"

"Sure! There 's lots o' money in d' fightin' game, an' I 'm fightin' all for Hermy. If ever I get a champ, I 'll have money to burn, an' then she 'll never be shy on d' dollar question no more, you bet! There 'll be no more needlework or Mulligan's for Hermy; it 'll be a farm in d' country wid roses climbin' around, an' chickens, an' — an' automobiles, an' servants to come when she pushes d' button — you bet!"

"Is she so fond of the country?"

"Well, I guess yes! An' flowers — Gee, she nearly eats 'em!"

"On the other hand," said Mr. Ravenslee, watching the smoke from his pipe with a dreamy eye, "on the other

hand I gather she does not like — Mr. M'Ginnis! I wonder why?"

"You can search me!" answered Spike, shaking his head, "but it's a sure thing she ain't got no use for Bud."

"And yet — you go around with him, Spike."

"But don't I tell ye he's been good t' me! He's goin' t' match me with some top-liners; he says if I can stick it I'll be a champion sure."

"Yes," nodded Mr. Ravenslee, "but when?"

"Oh, Bud's got it all doped out. But say — "

"And in the meantime your sister will go on feeding you and clothing you and — "

"Cheese it, Geoff," cried the boy, flushing. "You make a guy feel like a two-spot in the discard! I told you I'd try to get a steady job, an' so I will — but I ain't goin' to quit the fightin' game for nobody! 'N' say — I'm sleepy. How about it? You can have my bed, or the couch here, or you can get in Hermy's — "

"Thanks, the couch will do, Spike."

"Then I guess it's me for the feathers!" said Spike, rising and stretching, "so long, Geoff!"

And in a while, having finished his pipe and knocked out the ashes, Mr. Ravenslee stretched his long limbs upon the chintz-covered sofa, and, *mirabile dictu*, immediately fell asleep.

CHAPTER V

HOW MRS. TRAPES ACQUIRED A NEW LODGER, DESPITE HER ELBOWS

He awoke suddenly and sat up to find the room full of sunshine and Spike standing beside him, a bright-faced, merry-eyed Spike, very spruce and neat as to person.

"Say, Geoff," said he, "I 've seen Mrs. Trapes, an' she wants you to go over so she can pipe you off. 'N' say, you 're sure up against a catty proposition in her; if you don't hit it off on the spot as soon as she gets her lamps onto you, it 'll be nix for you, Geoff, an' nothin' doin'!"

"Lucid!" said Ravenslee, yawning, "and sounds promising!"

"Why, y' see, Geoff, she 's got a grouch on because I was out last night, so, if she gives you the gimlet eye at first, just josh her along a bit. Now slick yourself up an' come on." Obediently Mr. Ravenslee arose and having tightened his neckerchief and smoothed his curly hair, crossed the landing and followed Spike into the opposite flat, a place of startling cleanliness as to floors and walls, and everything therein; uncomfortably trim of aspect and direfully ornate as to rugs and carpet and sofa cushions.

Mrs. Trapes herself was elderly; she was also a woman of points, being bony and sharp featured, particularly as to elbows, which were generally bare. Indeed, they might be said to be her most salient and obtrusive features; but her shrewd, sharp eyes held an elusive kindliness at times, and when she smiled, which was very rarely, her elbows and her general sharpness were quite forgotten.

She was awaiting them in her parlour, enthroned in her best easy chair, a chair of green velvet where purple flowers bloomed riotously, her feet firm-planted upon a hearthrug cunningly enwrought with salmon-pink sunflowers. Bolt upright and stiff of back she sat, making the very utmost of her elbows, for her sleeves being rolled high (as was their wont) and her arms being folded within her apron, they projected themselves to left and right in highly threatening fashion. Sphinx-like she sat, very silent and very still, while her sharp eyes roved over Mr. Ravenslee's person from the toes of his boots to the dark hair that curled short and crisp above his brow. Thus she looked him up and she looked him down, viewing each garment in turn; lastly, she lifted her gaze to his face and stared at him — eye to eye.

And eye to eye Mr. Ravenslee, serene and calm as ever, met her look, while Spike, observing her granite-like expression and the fierce jut of her elbows, shuffled, and glanced toward the door. But still Mrs. Trapes glared up at Mr. Ravenslee, and still Mr. Ravenslee glanced down at Mrs. Trapes wholly unabashed, nay — he actually smiled, and, bowing his dark head, spoke in his easy, pleasant voice.

"A beautiful afternoon, Mrs. Trapes!"

Mrs. Trapes snorted.

"This room will suit me — er — admirably."

Mrs. Trapes started slightly, opened her grim lips, shut them again, and — wriggled her elbows.

"Yes, indeed," continued Mr. Ravenslee pleasantly, "I like this room — so nice and bright, like the rug and wall paper — especially the rug. Yes, I like the rug and the — er — stuffed owl in the corner!" and he nodded to a shapeless, moth-eaten something under a glass case against the wall.

Mrs. Trapes wriggled her elbows again and, glaring still, spoke harsh-voiced.

"Young feller, that owl 's a parrot!"

"A parrot — of course!" assented Mr. Ravenslee

gently, "and a very fine parrot too! Then the wax flowers and the antimacassars! What would a home be without them?" said he, dreamy-eyed and grave. "I think I shall be very bright and cheerful here, my dear Mrs. Trapes."

Mrs. Trapes swallowed audibly, stared at Spike until he writhed, and finally bored her sharp eyes into Mr. Ravenslee again.

"Young man," said she, "what name?"

"I think our friend Spike has informed you that I am sometimes called Geoffrey. Mrs. Trapes, our friend Spike told the truth."

"Young feller," she demanded, "'oo are you and — what?"

"Mrs. Trapes," he sighed, "I am a lonely wight, a wanderer in wild places, a waif, a stray, puffed hither and thither by a fate perverse —"

"Talking o' verses, you ain't a poet, are you?" enquired Mrs. Trapes, "last poet as lodged wi' me useter go to bed in 'is boots reg'lar! Consequently I ain't nowise drawed to poets —"

Mr. Ravenslee laughed and shook his head.

"Have no fear," he answered, "I 'm no poet nor ever shall be. I 'm quite an ordinary human being, I assure you."

"Young feller — references?"

"Mrs. Trapes, I have none — except my face. But you have very sharp eyes; look at me well. Do I strike you as a rogue or a thief?"

Here Spike, chancing to catch his eye, blushed painfully, while Mr. Ravenslee continued:

"Come, Mrs. Trapes, you have a motherly heart, I know, and I am a very lonely being who needs one like you to — to cook and care for his bodily needs and to look after the good of his solitary soul. Were I to search New York I could n't find another motherly heart so suited to my crying needs as yours; you won't turn me away, will you?" Saying which, Mr. Ravenslee smiled

his slow, sleepy smile and — wonder of wonders — Mrs. Trapes smiled too!

"When d' ye wanter come?"

"Now!"

"Land sakes!" she exclaimed.

"If it won't trouble you too much?" he added.

"There 's sheets to be aired —" she began, but checked suddenly to stare at him again. "Look a here, Mr. Geoffrey," she went on, "my terms is two-fifty a week, ten dollars *with* board, and a week in advance."

"Good!" nodded Mr. Ravenslee, "but since I 'm coming in at such short notice, I 'll pay three weeks ahead just to — er — bind the bargain. See — that will be thirty dollars, won't it?" And speaking, he drew a handful of crumpled bills from his pocket and proceeded to count out thirty dollars upon the green and yellow tablecloth.

"Sakes alive!" murmured Mrs. Trapes.

"And now," said he, "I 'll just step around the corner with Spike to buy — er — a toothbrush."

"Toothbrush!" echoed Mrs. Trapes faintly.

"And a few other things. I shall be in early to supper."

"Would a nice, English mutton chop wiv tomatoes —?"

"Excellent; and thank you, Mrs. Trapes, for sheltering a homeless wretch." So saying, her new boarder smiled and nodded and, following Spike out into the hallway, was gone.

But Mrs. Trapes stood awhile to stare after him, lost in speculation.

"A toothbrush!" said she. "My! My!" Then she turned to stare down at the pile of bills. "Now I wonder," said she, right hand caressing left elbow-point, "I jest wonder who he 's been a-choking of to get all that money? But I like his eyes! And his smile! And he looks a man — and honest! Well, well!"

CHAPTER VI

HOW SPIKE INITIATED MR. RAVENSLEE INTO THE GENTLE ART OF SHOPPING

"GEE!" exclaimed Spike, as they descended the many stairs, "she sure gave you the frosty-face, Geoff, but it did n't seem to joggle you any!"

"No, it did n't joggle me, Spike, because you see — I like her."

"Like Mrs. Trapes? You 'n' Hermy are about the only ones then; most every one in Mulligan's hates her an' gets scared stiff when she cuts loose! But say, you do keep on rubbing it in, I mean about — about thieving!"

"Probably it 's your conscience, Spike."

"You won't ever go telling any one or blowing d' game on me?"

"Spike, when I make a promise I generally keep it."

"Y' see, Geoff, it ain't as though I was a — a real crook."

"You meant to be."

"But I never stole nothin' in my life, Geoff."

"Suppose I had n't caught you?"

"Oh, well, cheese it, Geoff, cheese it! Let 's talk about something else."

"With pleasure. When does your sister return?"

"This evening, I guess. But, Geoff — say now, do I look like a real crook — do I?"

"No, you don't, Spike, that 's sure! And yet — only last night — "

"Ah, yes, I know — I know!" groaned the lad, "but I was crazy, I think. It was the whisky, Geoff, an' they doped me too, I guess! I don't remember much after we

left till I found myself in your swell joint. God! if I was only sure they doped me."

"Who?"

"Who? Why — gee, you nearly had me talking that time! Nix on the questions, Geoff, I ain't goin' to give 'em away; it ain't playin' square. Only, if two or three guys dopes a guy till a guy's think-box is like a cheese an' his mind as clear as mud, that poor guy ain't to be blamed for it, now, is he?"

"Why, certainly!" nodded Ravenslee.

"How d' ye make that out?"

"For being such a fool of a guy as to let other guys fool him, of course. Sounds a little cryptic, but I guess you understand."

"Oh, I get you!" sighed Spike drearily. "But say, didn't you come out to buy a toothbrush?"

"And other things, yes."

"Well, say, s'pose we quit chewing th' rag an' start in an' get 'em. There 's a Sheeny store on Ninth Avenue where you can get dandy shirts for fifty cents a throw."

"Sounds fairly reasonable!" nodded Mr. Ravenslee as they turned up Thirty-ninth Street.

"Then you want a new lid, Geoff!"

Mr. Ravenslee took off the battered hat and looked at it.

"What 's the matter with this?" he enquired.

"Nothin', Geoff, only it wants burnin'," sighed Spike. "An' then — them boots — oh, gee!"

"Are they so bad as that?"

"Geoff, they sure are the punkest pavement pounders in little old N' York. Why, a Dago hodcarrier would n't be seen dead in 'em; look at th' patches. Gee whizz! Where did His Whiskers dig 'em up from?"

"I fancy they were his own — once," answered Mr. Ravenslee, surveying his bulbous, be-patched footgear a little ruefully.

"Well, I 'll gamble a stack of blue chips there ain't such a phoney pair in Manhattan Village."

"They 're not exactly things of beauty, I 'll admit," sighed Mr. Ravenslee, "but still — "

"They 're rotten, Geoff! They 're all to the garbage can! They are the cheesiest proposition in sidewalk slappers I ever piped off!"

"Hum! You 're inclined to be a trifle discouraging, Spike!"

"Why, ye see, Geoff, I wan'cher t' meet th' push, an' I don't want 'em to think I 'm floatin' around with a down-an'-out from Battyville! You must have some real shoes, Geoff."

"Enough — it shall be done!" nodded Mr. Ravenslee.

"Well, tan Oxfords are all to th' grapes just now, Geoff. I don't mean those giddy-lookin' pumps with flossy bows onto 'em, but somethin' sporty, good an' yellow that 'll flash an' let folks know you 're comin'. And here 's Eckstein's!"

With which abrupt remark Spike plunged into a shop, very dark and narrow by reason of a heterogeneous collection of garments, of ribbons and laces, of collars and ties of many shapes and hues, together with a thousand and one other things that displayed themselves from floor to ceiling; amidst which, Mr. Ravenslee observed a stir, a slight confusion, and from a screen of vivid-bosomed shirts a head protruded itself, round as to face and sleek as to hair.

"Greetin's, Ikey!" said Spike, nodding to the head. "How 's pork to-day?"

"Aw — vat you vant now, hey?" enquired the head. "Vat 's the vord; now — shpit it out!"

"It ain't me, Moses, it 's me friend wants a sporty fit-out an' discount for spot cash, see? Show us your half-dollar shirts for a starter — an' sporty ones, mind!"

Immediately out came drawers and down came boxes, and very soon the small counter was littered with piles of raiment variously gaudy which Spike viewed and disparaged with such knowing judgment that the salesman's respect proportionately grew, and Mr. Ravenslee, loung-

ing in the background, was forgotten quite, the while they chaffered after this manner:

SALESMAN. "Here vos a shirt as can't be beat for der money — neglegee boosom an' turnover cuffs, warranted shrunk, and all for vun dollar."

SPIKE. "Come off, Aaron, come off! Fifty cents is th' bid!"

SALESMAN. "Fifty cents? Vy, on Broadvay dey 'd sharge you — "

SPIKE. "Wake up, Ike! This ain't Broadway! And fifty 's the limit!"

SALESMAN. "But shust look at dem pink shtripes — so vide as an inch! Dere 's fifty cents' vorth of dye in dem shtripes, an' I 'll give it you for seventy-five cents! On Broadvay — "

SPIKE. "We 're gettin' there, Ikey, we 're gettin' there; keep on, fifty 's the call!"

SALESMAN. "Fifty cents! Oi! Oi! I vould be ruined! A neglegee boosom and turnover cuffs! Vell, vell — I 'll wrap it up, so — an' I make you a present of it for — sixty! An' on Broadvay — "

SPIKE. "Come on, Geoff, Aaron 's talking in his sleep! Come on, we 'll go on to Mendelbaum's; see — we want shirts, an' ties, an' socks, an' collars, an' — "

SALESMAN. "Vait — vait! Mendelbaum 's a grafter — vait! I got th' best selection of socks an' ties on Ninth Av'noo, an' here 's a neglegee shirt with turnover cuffs — an' only fifty cents. But at Mendelbaum's or on Broadvay — "

In this way Mr. Ravenslee became possessed of sundry shirts whose bosoms blushed in striped and spotted splendour, of vivid-hued ties and of handkerchiefs with flaming borders. From shop to shop Spike led him and, having a free hand, bought right royally, commanding that their purchases be sent around hotfoot to Mulligan's. Thus Spike ordered, and Mr. Ravenslee dutifully paid, marvelling that so much might be bought for so little.

"I guess that 's about all the fixings you 'll need,

Geoff!" said Spike, as they elbowed their way along the busy avenue.

"Well," answered Mr. Ravenslee, as he filled his pipe, "it will certainly take me some time to wear 'em out — especially those shirts!"

"They sure are dandies, Geoff! Yes, those shirts are all to the lollipops, but say, you made a miscue gettin' them black shoes," and here Spike turned to stare down at his companion's newly acquired footwear. "Why not buy the yellow boys I rustled up for you. They sure were some shoes!"

"They were indeed, Spike."

"Gee, but it must feel good t' be able t' buy whatever you want!" sighed Spike dreamily. "Some day I mean to have a wad big enough t' choke a cow — but I wish I had it right now!"

"What would you do with it?"

"Do with it! Well, say, first off I 'd — I 'd buy Hermy them roses —th' whole lot," and he pointed where, among the pushcarts drawn up against the curb, was one where roses bloomed, filling the air with their sweetness. "An' next she should — "

"Then go and buy 'em, Spike!" and speaking, Mr. Ravenslee thrust a bill into Spike's hand.

"Gee — a twenty-spot! Can I, Geoff?" he cried, his blue eyes shining. "Th' whole lot — on d' level?"

"On the level."

Spike started joyfully away, paused, turned, and came back with head a-droop.

"I guess it can't be done, Geoff," he sighed.

"Why not?"

"Well, y' see, it ain't as it was my own money, really."

"But it is!"

"No, it ain't! I have n't earned it, Geoff, an' I ain't a guy as sponges on his pals, not much I ain't. Take your money, Geoff. When I buy Hermy anything it 's goin' to be bought with money as I 've earned."

So Mr. Ravenslee thrust the bill back into his pocket

and thereafter walked on, frowning and very silent, as one lost in perplexed thought. Wherefore, after more than one furtive glance at him, Spike addressed him with a note of diffidence in his voice.

"You ain't sore with me, are you, Geoff?"

"Sore with you?"

"I mean, because I — I did n't take your money?"

Here Mr. Ravenslee turned to glance down at Spike and clap a hand upon his shoulder.

"No," he answered, "I 'm not sore with you. And I think — yes, I think your sister is going to be proud of you one day."

And now it was Spike's turn to grow thoughtful, while his companion, noting the flushed brow and the firm set of the boyish lips, frowned no longer.

"Hello, there 's Tony!" exclaimed Spike as they turned into Forty-second Street, "over there — behind the pushcart — th' guy with th' peanuts!" And he pointed where, from amid a throng of vehicles, a gaily painted barrow emerged, a barrow whereon were peanuts unbaked, baked, and baking as the shrill small whistle above its stove proclaimed to all and sundry. It was propelled by a slender, graceful, olive-skinned man, who, beholding Spike, flashed two rows of brilliant teeth and halted his barrow beside the curb.

"How goes it, Tony?" questioned Spike, whereat the young Italian smiled, and thereafter sighed and shook his head.

"Da beezeneez-a ver' good," he sighed, "da peanut-a sell-a all-a da time! But my lil' Pietro he sick, he no da same since his moder die-a, me no da same — have-a none of da luck — noding — nix!"

"Hard cheese, Tony!" quoth Spike. "But say, have you seen th' Spider kickin' around?"

"No, I ain't! But you tell-a da Signorina —"

"Sure I will —"

"My lil' Pietro he love-a da Signorina; me, I love-a her — she so good, so generosa, ah, yes!" And taking

off his hat in one hand, Tony kissed the other and waved it gracefully in the air.

"Right-o, Tony!" nodded Spike. "You can let it go at that. An' say — this is me friend Geoff."

Tony gripped Mr. Ravenslee's hand and shook it.

"You one o' da bunch — one o' da boys, hey? Good-a luck." So saying, Tony nodded, flashed his white teeth again, and seizing the handles of his barrow, trundled off his peanut oven, whistling soft and shrill.

"Tony 's only a guinney," Spike explained as they walked on again. "But he 's white, Geoff — 'n' say, he 's a holy terror in a mix-up! Totes one o' them stiletto knives. I 've seen him stab down into a glass full of water an' never spill a drop, which sure wants some doing."

Evening was falling, and dismal Tenth Avenue was wrapping itself in shadow, a shadow made more manifest by small lights that burned dismally in small and dingy shops, a shadow, this, wherein moving shadows jostled with lounging shoulder or elbow. As they passed a certain dark entry where divers of these vague shadows lounged, a long arm was stretched thence, and a large hand gripped Spike's shoulder.

"Why — hello, Spider," said he, halting. "What 's doin'?"

"Nawthin' much, Kid — only little M — 'say, who 's wid you?"

"Oh, this is a friend o' mine — Geoff, dis is d' Spider!" explained Spike.

Visualised in "the Spider" Ravenslee saw a tall, slender youth, very wide in the shoulder and prodigiously long of arm and leg, and who looked at him keen-eyed from beneath a wide cap brim, while his square jaws worked with untiring industry upon a wad of chewing gum.

"Good evening!" said Ravenslee and held out his hand. The Spider ceased chewing for a moment, nodded, and turning to Spike, chewed fiercer than ever.

"Where youse goin', Kid?" he enquired, masticating the while.

"What was you goin' to tell me, Spider?" demanded Spike, a note of sudden anxiety in his voice.

"Nawthin', Kid."

"Aw — come off, Spider! What was it?"

The Spider glanced up at the gloomy sky, glanced down at the dingy pavement, and finally beckoned Spike aside with a quick back-jerk of the head, and, stooping close, whispered something in his ear — something that caused the boy to start away with clenched hands and face of horror, something that seemed to trouble him beyond speech, for he stood a moment dumb and staring, then found utterance in a sudden, hoarse cry:

"No — no! It ain't true — oh, my God!"

And with the cry, Spike turned sharp about and, springing to a run, vanished into the shadows.

"What 's the matter?" demanded Ravenslee, turning on the Spider.

"Matter?" repeated that youth, staring at him under his cap brim again; "well, say — I guess you 'd better ask d' Kid."

"Where 's he gone?"

"How do I know?"

"It is n't — his sister, is it?"

"Miss Hermione? Well, I guess not!" So saying, the Spider, chewing ferociously, turned and vanished down the dark entry with divers other shadows.

For a moment Mr. Ravenslee stood where he was, staring uncertainly after him; presently however he went on toward Mulligan's, though very slowly, and with black brows creased in frowning perplexity.

CHAPTER VII

CONCERNING ANKLES, STAIRS, AND NEIGHBOURLINESS

It was in no very pleasant humour that Geoffrey Ravenslee began to climb the many stairs (that much-trodden highway) that led up to his new abode; he climbed them slowly, frowning in a dark perplexity, and wholly unconscious of the folk that jostled him or paused to stare after him as he went.

But presently, and all at once, he became aware of one who climbed half a flight above him, and, glancing up, he saw a foot in a somewhat worn shoe, a shapely foot nevertheless, joined to a slender ankle which peeped and vanished alternately beneath a neat, well-brushed skirt that swayed to the vigorous action of the shapely limbs it covered. He was yet observing the soft, rounded curves of this most feminine back when he became aware of two facts: one, that she bore a heavy suit case in her neatly gloved hand; two, that the tress of hair peeping rebellious beneath the neat hat brim was of a wondrous yellow gold. Instantly he hastened his steps, and reaching out his hand almost instinctively, sought to relieve her of her burden.

"Allow me!" said he.

She stopped, and turning on the stair above, looked down on him with a pair of wondering blue eyes; her cheeks glowed, and she was panting a little. For a long moment they fronted each other thus silently upon that grimy, narrow stair, she above with gracious head stooped, her dark eyes questioning and wistful. And looking up into the flushed loveliness of her face, those eyes deep and soft beneath their long, black lashes, the tender droop of those vivid lips, beholding all this, he knew her to be a thousand times more beautiful than any photo-

graph could possibly portray, wherefore he bared his head, and striving to speak, could find no words to utter. For a moment longer she hesitated while her clear eyes searched his face, then the red lips curved in a little wistful smile.

"Thank you!" she said, and, yielding him her burden, led the way up-stairs. "I 'm afraid it 's rather heavy," she said over her shoulder after they had climbed another flight.

"It 's quite too heavy for you!" he answered.

"Oh, but I 've carried it often before now."

"Then you should n't!"

"But I have to!"

"No," said Ravenslee, shaking his head, "you should let your brother bring it up for you."

"My brother!" she exclaimed, pausing to look her amazement. And again as she stood thus poised above him, he took joy to note the warmth of her rich colouring, the soft, round column of her white throat, the gracious breadth of hip and shoulder.

"You know I have a brother?"

"Oh, yes, Spike — er — that is, Arthur and I are quite — er — ancient cronies — pals, you know — friends, I mean —" Mr. Ravenslee was actually stammering.

"Oh, really?" she said softly; but all at once, becoming aware of the fixity of his regard, the colour deepened in her cheek, the long lashes drooped and, turning away, she went on up the stair.

"It 's a long way up yet! Had n't you better let me take it?"

"Not for worlds!" he answered.

"Is n't it getting heavier?" she enquired, as they climbed the next flight.

"Decidedly heavier!"

"Then please," said she, slackening her pace, "please let me take it!"

"On the contrary," he answered, his gaze on her slender foot and ankle, "I should like to carry it for you all my — er — ah, that is — I mean —"

Mr. Ravenslee was stammering again.

"Yes?"

He was aware that the shapely foot had faltered in its going.

"As often as I may, Miss Hermione."

Hereupon the shapely foot halted altogether, and once again she turned to look at him in wide-eyed surprise.

"You know my name?"

"I learned it from Arthur, and — I shall never forget it!"

"Why not?"

"Well, because it is rather uncommon and — very beautiful!"

"Oh!" said Hermione, and went on up the stair again, yet not before he had seen the flush was back in her cheek.

"Are you getting tired yet?" she enquired, without looking round.

"Not appreciably," he answered, "but if you think I need a rest — "

"No, no!" she laughed, "we should never get off these frightful stairs!"

"Even that might have its compensations!" he murmured.

"And we 've been much longer than if you 'd let me carry it up myself."

"But then we 've no cause for panting haste, have we?" he suggested.

"And we have four more flights to climb."

"So few!" he sighed.

"You see, I live at the very tip-top."

"Good!" said he.

At this she glanced down at him over the sweep of her shoulder.

"Why 'good'?" she demanded.

"Because I also live at the tip-top."

"Do you — oh!"

"With the excellent Mrs. Trapes."

"But I thought she had lost her lodger?"

"She had the — er — extreme good fortune to find a new one to-day."

"Meaning you?"

"Meaning me."

By this time they had reached the topmost landing, where Mr. Ravenslee set down the suit case almost reluctantly.

"Thank you!" said Hermione, looking at him with her frank gaze.

"Heaven send I may earn your thanks again — and very soon," he answered, lifting the battered hat.

"You did n't tell me your name!" said she, fumbling in a well-worn little hand bag for her latchkey.

"I am called Geoffrey."

Hermione opened the door and, taking up the suit case, held out her hand.

"Good-by, Mr. Geoffrey!"

"For the present!" said he, and though his tone was light there was a very real humility in his attitude as he stood bareheaded before her. "For the present!" he repeated.

"Well — we are very near neighbours," said she, dark lashes a-droop.

"And neighbourliness is next to godliness — is n't it?"

"Is it?"

"Well, I think so, anyway? So, Miss Hermione — not 'good-by.'"

She glanced swiftly up at him, flushed, and turning about, was gone. But even so, before her door closed quite, she spoke soft-voiced: "Good — evening, Mr. Geoffrey!"

Thereafter, for a space, Mr. Ravenslee stood precisely where he was, staring hard at the battered hat; yet it is not to be supposed that the sight of this could possibly have brought the smile to his lips, and into his eyes a look that surely none had ever seen there before — such a preposterously shabby, disreputable old hat! Of course not!

CHAPTER VIII

OF CANDIES AND CONFIDENCES

"Oh!" said Mrs. Trapes, "so you 've come? Good land, Mr. Geoffrey, there 's parcels an' packages been a-coming for you constant ever since you went out! Whatever have you been a-buying of?" And opening the door of his small bedroom, she indicated divers packages with a saucepan lid she happened to be holding.

"Well," said her lodger, seating himself upon the bed, "if I remember rightly, there are shirts, and socks, and pajamas, and a few other oddments of the sort. And here, when I can get it out of my pocket, is a box of candies. I don't know if you are fond of such things, but most of the sex feminine are, I believe. Pray take them as a mark of my — er — humble respect!"

"Candy!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes, turning the gaily bedecked box over and over, and glaring at it fierce-eyed. "Fer me?"

"If you will deign acceptance."

"Candy!" she repeated, elbows a-twitch. "Fer me? Land sakes, Mr. Geoffrey, I — I — " Here, very abruptly, she turned about and vanished into the kitchen.

Mr. Ravenslee, lounging upon his white bed, was taking languid stock of his purchases when Mrs. Trapes suddenly reappeared, clutching a toasting fork.

"Mr. Geoffrey," she said, glaring still, "them candies must ha' cost you a sight o' money?"

"True, certain monies were expended, Mrs. Trapes."

"They must ha' cost you well nigh a dollar-fifty, I reckon?"

"They did!" nodded Mr. Ravenslee, smiling.

"My land!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes, and vanished again.

Mr. Ravenslee was sighing over a hideously striped shirt when Mrs. Trapes was back again, flourishing a very large tablespoon.

"Mr. Geoffrey," said she, "it 's nigh forty years since any one bought me a box o' chocolates! An' now they look so cute all done up in them gold an' silver wrappin's as I don't wanter eat 'em — seems a sin, it do. But — Mr. Geoffrey I — I 'd like to — thank ye — " and lo, she was gone again!

Mr. Ravenslee had just pitched the striped shirt out of the window when behold, Mrs. Trapes was back yet once more, this time grasping a much battered but more bepolished dish cover.

"Mr. Geoffrey," said she, "I ain't good at thankin' folks, no, I ain't much on gratitood — never having had much to gratify over — but them candies is goin' to be consoomed slow an' reverent and in a proper sperrit o' gratitood. And now if you 're ready to eat your supper, your supper 's a-waitin' to be ate!"

So saying, she led the way into the parlour, where upon a snowy cloth, in a dish tastefully garnished with fried tomatoes, the English mutton chop reposed, making the very most of itself; the which Mr. Ravenslee forthwith proceeded to attack with surprising appetite and gusto.

"Is it tender?" enquired Mrs. Trapes anxiously. "Heaven pity that butcher if it ain't! Is it tasty, kind of?"

"It 's delicious," nodded her lodger. "Really, Hell's Kitchen seems to suit me; I eat and sleep like a new man!"

"So you ain't lived here long, Mr. Geoffrey?" queried Mrs. Trapes, eagle-eyed.

"Not long enough to — er — sigh for pastures new. Don't go, Mrs. Trapes, I love to hear folks talk; sit down and tell me tales of dead kings and — er — I mean, converse of our neighbours, will you?"

"I will so, an' thank ye kindly, Mr. Geoffrey, if you don't mind me sucking a occasional candy?"

"Pray do, Mrs. Trapes," he said heartily; whereupon, having fetched her chocolates, Mrs. Trapes ensconced herself in the easy chair and opening the box, viewed its contents with glistening eyes.

"You 're an Englishman, ain't you?" she enquired after a while, munching luxuriously.

"No, but my mother was born in England."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes. "So was I — born in the Old Kent Road, Mr. Geoffrey. I came over to N' York thirty long years ago as cook general to Hermy Chesterton's ma. When she went and married again, I left her an' got married myself to Trapes — a foreman, Mr. Geoffrey, with a noble 'eart as 'ad wooed me long!" Here Mrs. Trapes opened the candy box again and, after long and careful deliberation, selected a chocolate with gentle, toil-worn fingers, and putting it in her mouth, sighed her approbation. "They sure are good!" she murmured. "But talkin' o' Hermy Chesterton's ma," she went on after a blissful interval, "I been wondering where you came to meet that b'y Arthur?"

"Ah, Mrs. Trapes," sighed Ravenslee, leaning back in his chair and shaking a rueful head, "you touch on gloomy matters. As the story books say, 'thereby hangs a tale' — the dismal tale of a miserable wretch whose appetite was bad, whose sleep was worse, and whose temper was worst of all — oh, a very wretched wretch indeed!"

"My land!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes, stopping abruptly in the act of masticating a large chocolate walnut, "so bad as that, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"Worse!" he nodded gloomily. "It is indeed a gloomy tale, a tale dark and dismal that I love not the telling of, for, Mrs. Trapes, that more than hopeless wretch stands, or rather sits, before you!"

"Save us!" ejaculated Mrs. Trapes, "'meanin' yourself?"

"My unworthy self!"

"Lord!" she whispered, "what you been a-doin' of?"

"Wasting a promising life, Mrs. Trapes!"

"You mean," she questioned in a harsh whisper, "you mean as you 've — killed some one — accidental?"

"Oh, no, the life was mine own, Mrs. Trapes."

"Land sakes, Mr. Geoffrey, you give me quite a turn! Y' see, sometimes folks gets theirselves killed around here — an' it 's always accidental — sure!" and Mrs. Trapes nodded meaningly and went on chewing. "But say," she demanded, suddenly sharp of eye, "where does Arthur come in?"

"Arthur comes in right here, Mrs. Trapes! In fact, Arthur broke into my — er — life just when things were at their darkest generally. Arthur found me very depressed and gloomy. Arthur taught me that life might yet have its uses. Arthur lifted me out of the Slough of Despond. Arthur brought me — to you! And behold! life is good and perchance shall be even better if — ah yes, if! So you see, my dear Mrs. Trapes, Arthur has done much for me, consequently I have much to thank Arthur for. Indeed, I look upon Arthur —"

"Shucks!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes, "that 'll be about enough about Arthur — Arthur, indeed! You oughter know his sister!" Now at this her lodger started and glanced at her so suddenly, and with eyes so unexpectedly keen that once again she suspended mastication.

"Now, in the name of all that 's wonderful, Mrs. Trapes, why mention her?"

"Why, because she 's worth knowin'! Because she 's the best, the bravest, the sweetest thing that ever went in petticoats. She 's beautiful inside and out — mind, I 've nursed her in these arms years ago an' I know she 's — oh, well, you ought to meet Hermy!"

"Mrs. Trapes, I have!"

"Eh? You have? My lan'!" Mrs. Trapes bolted a caramel in her astonishment and thereafter stared at Ravenslee with watering eyes. "An' you to set there an'

never tell me!" quoth she, "an' Hermy never told me — well, well! When did ye meet her? Whereabouts? How?"

"About half an hour ago! Coming up the stairs! I carried her grip!"

"Well!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes, staring, "well, well!" and she continued to munch candy and to stare and say "well!" at intervals until arrested by a new thought. "That b'y!" she exclaimed. "Was Arthur with her?"

"No," answered Ravenslee, wrinkling his brows, "I lost him on my way home."

Mrs. Trapes sighed and shook her head.

"The sun sure rises and sets for her in that b'y — an' him only her stepbrother at that!"

"Her stepbrother?"

"Yes!" nodded Mrs. Trapes emphatically. "Hermy's ma were a lady, same as Hermy is; so were her pa, I mean a gentleman, of course. But Hermy's father died, an' then her ma, poor soul, goes an' marries a good-lookin' loafer way beneath her, a man as were n't fit to black her shoes, let alone take 'em off! And Arthur 's his father's child. Oh, a good enough b'y as b'ys go, but wild, now and then, and rough, like his dad."

"I see!" nodded her hearer, thoughtfully.

"Now me, though married ten long year, never 'ad no children, so ever since Hermy's mother died, I 've tried to watch over her and help her as much as I could. She 's had a mighty hard struggle, one thing and another, Mr. Geoffrey, an' now I 've known her an' loved her so long it kind o' seems as if she belonged to me — almost!"

"She looks very good and — brave!" said Mr. Ravenslee.

"Good!" cried Mrs. Trapes, and snorted. "I tell you she 's jest a angel o' light, Mr. Geoffrey. If you 'd seen her, like I have, goin' from one poor little sick child to another, kissing their little hot faces, tellin' 'em stories, payin' for doctor's stuff out of her bit o' savings, mendin' their clo'es — an' prayin' over 'em when they died — why

— I guess you 'd think she was a angel too! One sure thing," said Mrs. Trapes rising, " there ain't a breathin' man in all this whole round earth as is fit to go down on 'is knees an' kiss 'er little foot — not a one! No, sir!"

" No, I don't think there is!" said Mr. Ravenslee slowly.

" As for that Bud M'Ginnis," cried Mrs. Trapes, seizing on the coffee-pot much as if it had been that gentleman's throat, " I 'd — I 'd like to — bat him one as would quiet him for keeps — I would so!" and she jerked the coffee-pot fiercely, much to the detriment of her snowy tablecloth. " There! now see what I done, but I do get all worked up over that loafer!"

" Pray why?"

" Why?" snorted Mrs. Trapes indignantly. " Has n't he made eyes at her ever since they was kids together? Has n't he worried and worried at her, an' because she won't look at him if she can help it, don't he try to get back at her through that b'y — "

" How does he?"

" How? By puttin' him up to fightin' an' all sorts o' devilment, by teachin' him to be tough, by gettin' him drunk — "

" Oh, does he?"

" Why, bless ye, Bud M'Ginnis can do anything with him!"

" How so?"

" Because Arthur jest worships M'Ginnis for his strength and toughness!"

" I see!"

" Yes, Arthur thinks there 's nobody in the world could lick Bud M'Ginnis."

" Hum! May I smoke, Mrs. Trapes?"

" Sure ye may!" she nodded, and began to collect the supper things. " I tell you what," she exclaimed suddenly, flourishing the fork she had just taken up, " if somebody would only come along an' thrash M'Ginnis, thrash him good, it would be a sight better for every one

around here — it would so! M'Ginnis is always makin' trouble for some one or other, an' there ain't a man big enough or got heart enough to stand up to him — not even Spider Connolly. Wish I was a man, that 's all — just for an hour! Ah!" Here Mrs. Trapes snorted fiercer than usual, and the jut of her elbows was deadly.

"And he gets Arthur drunk, does he!" said Ravenslee, puffing dreamily at his pipe.

"Yes!" sighed Mrs. Trapes as she loaded a tray with the supper things. "Hermy 's seen him drunk twice, to my knowing, an' I thought it would break her 'eart, poor dear! Y' see, Mr. Geoffrey, his father died o' the drink, an' she 's frightened for fear Arthur should go the same road. Oh, Hermy's life ain't all ice-cream sodas an' lollipops, not much it ain't, poor, brave, beautiful thing!"

Saying which, Mrs. Trapes, sighing again, took up her tray; Mr. Ravenslee, having opened the door for her, closed it again, lighted his pipe, and sinking into the easy-chair, fell into frowning thought.

The windows were open, and from the crowded court below rose the shrill babel of many children's voices, elfin shrieks and cries accompanied by the jingle of a barrel-organ, very wiry and very much out of tune; but Ravenslee, deep-plunged in thought, heard nought of it nor heeded the fact that the pipe, tight-clenched between his strong, white teeth, was out. For Geoffrey Ravenslee had set himself a problem.

The barrel-organ ceased its jangle, the children's voices were gradually hushed, as, one by one, they were called in by hoarse-voiced mothers and led away to bed; and the gloomy court grew ever gloomier as evening deepened into night. But still Mr. Ravenslee lounged in the easy-chair, so motionless that he might have been asleep except for the grim set of his jaw and the bright, wide-open eyes of him.

At last, and suddenly, he sat erect, for he had heard a voice whose soft murmur he recognised even through the closed door.

"I don't know, Hermy dear," came in Mrs. Trapes'

harsh tones, "I 'm afraid he 's gone to bed — anyway, I 'll see!" Ensued a knocking of bony knuckles and, opening the door, Ravenslee beheld Mrs. Trapes. Behind her stood Hermione, and in her eyes he saw again that look of wistful, anxious fear he had wondered over at the first.

"Oh, Mr. Geoffrey," said Mrs. Trapes, "it 's eleven o'clock, an' that b'y ain't in yet. Here 's Hermy been out hunting the streets for him and ain't found him. Consequently she 's worriting herself sick over him — drat 'im!"

"Out on the streets!" repeated Ravenslee. "Alone?"

"Yes," answered Hermione, "I had to — try and find him."

"But alone! And at this hour! Miss Hermione, that was surely very — er — unwise of you."

"Yes, you see I did n't know where to look," she sighed. "I 've been to the saloon but he was n't there — "

"The saloon? Good Lord!" exclaimed Ravenslee, his placidity quite forgotten, his face set and stern. "That is no place for you — or any girl — "

"I must go to find Arthur," she said softly.

"No, not there — even for that."

"Why not?"

"Think of the — the risks you run! No girl should take such chances."

"Oh, you mean — that!" said Hermione, meeting his eyes with her frank glance. "But no one would try to insult me hereabouts; this is n't Broadway or Fifth Avenue, Mr. Geoffrey!" and she smiled a very sad, weary little smile. "But I came to ask if you happened to know where Arthur is or — whom he was with?"

"Was n't wid that Bud M'Ginnis, was he?" questioned Mrs. Trapes sharply.

"No, he was n't with M'Ginnis," answered Mr. Ravenslee, in frowning perplexity, "but that 's about all I can tell you."

"Thank you," sighed the girl, "I must go and try

again. I know I shall find him — soon." But, though she tried to speak in a tone of cheerful confidence, her shapely head drooped rather hopelessly.

"You mean you are going out on to the — to look for him again?"

"Why, of course," she answered, "I must find Arthur!"

"Don't, Hermy, don't — so pale an' tired as you are, don't go again!" pleaded Mrs. Trapes, her usual sharpness transfigured into a deep and yearning tenderness; even her voice seemed to lose something of its harshness. "Don't worry, my sweet, the b'y 'll find his way home right enough, like he did last time."

"Like — last time!" cried Hermione, and shivering, she leaned against the wall as if she were faint. "Ah, no, no!" she whispered, "not — like last time!" and bowing her head she hid her face in her hands.

Close, close about that quivering form came two motherly arms, and Mrs. Trapes fell to passionate invective and tender soothing, thus:

"There, there, my love — my pretty, don't remember that last time! Oh, drat my fool's tongue for remindin' you, drat it, my dear, my honey! Ah, don't go breakin' your angel's 'eart along of Arthur, my precious — and drat him too! That b'y 'll come back all right, he will — he will, I know he will. Oh, if I was only behind 'im with a toasting fork! There, there, Hermy dear, don't fret, Arthur 'll come home all right. My honey, you 're all tuckered out, an' here it 's gettin' on to midnight, an' you to go to Englewood by the early car! Go to bed, dear, an' I 'll sit up for Arthur. Only don't cry, Hermy — "

"Oh, I 'm not crying, dear," said Hermione, lifting her head. "See, I have n't shed a tear! But I must find Arthur. I could n't rest or sleep; I should lie listening for his step. So you see, dear, I must go out and find him!"

Hereupon, with swift, dexterous fingers, Hermione straightened the very neat hat which the embrace of Mrs.

Trapes had rendered somewhat askew, and, turning to the door, came face to face with Mr. Ravenslee, and in his hand she beheld his battered hat, but she did not notice how fiercely his powerful fingers gripped it.

"Miss Hermione," said he, in his soft, indolent voice, and regarding her beneath languidly drooping lids, "pray accept the hospitality of my — er — apartment. You will find the easy-chair is very easy, and while you sit here with Mrs. Trapes, I 'll find your brother and bring him here to you."

"Thank you," she answered a little shortly because of his lazy tone or his sleepy eyes, or his general languid air, or all of them together. "Thank you, but I 'm going myself; I must go, I — I could n't wait — "

"Oh, but really you must, you know!"

"Must?" she repeated, looking her surprise.

"Ab-solutely must!" he answered softly, nodding so sleepily that she almost expected him to yawn. "You really can't go out again to-night, you know," he added. Hermione's blue eyes flashed, her delicate brows knit themselves, and Mr. Ravenslee saw that she was taller than he had thought.

"You mean you will — try to stop me?" she demanded.

"No, I mean that I — will stop you!"

"But you 'd never dare — "

"I would dare even your anger in so good a cause. Ah, please don't be angry with me, Miss Hermione, because — " and here his sleepy voice grew positively slumberous, "you shall not go out into the streets again to-night!"

"Ah, an' that 's right too, Mr. Geoffrey!" cried Mrs. Trapes. "Hermy needs some one strong enough to master her now an' then, she is that wilful, she is so!"

But now all at once, as he watched, Hermione's eyes filled with great, slow-gathering tears, her firm-set lips grew soft and quivered pitifully, and she sank down in the easy-chair, her golden head bowed upon the green and

yellow tablecloth. The battered hat tumbled to the floor, and striding forward, he had bent and caught one of her listless hands all in a moment, and thereafter, though it struggled feebly once, he held it closely prisoned in his own.

"Oh, don't!" he pleaded, his words coming quick and eager, "don't do that! Do you think I can't see that you 're all overwrought? How can I let you go tramping out there in the streets again? You could n't go — you must n't go! Stay here with good Mrs. Trapes, I beg of you, and I swear I 'll bring Arthur to you! Only you must promise me to wait here and be patient, however long I am — you must promise, Hermione!"

She lifted her heavy head and looked at him through her tears. And surely, surely in the face that bent above her was none of indolence or languor. These lips were firm now and close-set, these lazy eyes were wide and bright, and in them that which brought the warm colour to her cheeks; but reverence was there also, wherefore she met his look, and her fingers were not withdrawn from his until she had answered: "I promise!"

"That 's my wise dearie!" nodded Mrs. Trapes. "And good luck to ye, Mr. Geoffrey, an' when you find that b'y, say as I wish — ah, how I wish I was back of him with a toasting fork, that 's all!"

Mr. Ravenslee caught up the shabby hat, opened the door, and going out, closed it softly behind him.

"Hermy," said Mrs. Trapes, clasping the girl's slender waist in her long arm and leading her into the brightest of bright little kitchens, "I like that young feller — who he is I don't know, what he does I don't know, but what he is I do know, an' that 's — a man, my dear! An' he called you — Hermione! Sounds kind o' pretty the way he says it, don't you think?" But Hermione did n't answer.

Meanwhile Mr. Ravenslee, descending the monotonous stairs, paused suddenly to smile and to clap hand to thigh.

"A toasting fork!" said he, "a toasting fork is an instrument possessing three or more sharp points! Ha! Mrs. Trapes is a woman of singularly apposite ideas." And he smiled a little grimly as he went on down the stairs.

CHAPTER IX

WHICH RECOUNTS THE END OF AN EPISODE

Midway down he beheld two burly policemen who mounted, one behind the other, their grey helmets, blue coats, and silver buttons seeming to fill the narrow stairway.

"Anything wrong?" he enquired, as they drew level.

"Not wid you dis time, bo!" answered one, blandly contemptuous, and strode on up the stair, twirling his club in practised hand, his fellow officer at his heels.

Thus rebuked, Mr. Ravenslee looked after them with quick-drawn brows until, remembering his broken hat brim and shabby clothes, he smiled and went upon his way. Reaching the dingy lower hall he beheld the solitary gas-jet flare whose feeble light showed five lounging forms, rough fellows who talked together in hoarse murmurs and with heads close together.

He was passing by, when, in one of these deep-throated talkers, he recognised the long limbs and wide, sloping shoulders of the Spider. Mr. Ravenslee paused and nodded.

"Good evening!" said he, but this time kept his hands in his pockets. The Spider eyed him somewhat askance, shifted his wad of chewing gum from one cheek to the other, and spoke.

"'Lo!" said he.

"Do you know where Spike is?"

"S'pose I do — then what?" demanded the Spider with a truculent lurch of his wide shoulders.

"Then I shall ask you to tell me where I can find him — or better still, you might show me."

"Oh, might I?"

"You might!"

The feelings of the Spider waxing beyond mere words, he looked at the speaker, viewed him up and down with a glance of contemptuous hostility, whereat Ravenslee's whole expression melted into one of lamblike meekness.

"Say," quoth the Spider at last, "there 's only one thing as I can't stand about you, an' that 's — everything!"

"Sorry for that," murmured Ravenslee, "because I rather like you, Spider. I think you could be quite a decent fellow if you tried very hard! Come, shake your grouch and let 's be friends."

"Say," growled the Spider, "what you 're sufferin' from 's a hard neck! You ain't no friend o' mine — not much you ain't, savvy? So crank up an' get on yer way like a good little feller!"

"But you see I 'm anxious to find Spike because —"

"Well, say, you keep on bein' anxious, only do it somewheres else. I don't want youse around where I am, see? So beat it while d' goin 's good!"

"Why — er — no," said Ravenslee in his laziest tones, "no, I don't think I 'll beat it. I guess I 'll stay right here and wait until you are so kind, so — er — very kind and obliging as to show me where I can find Spike." And he sighed plaintively as he lounged against the wall behind, but his eyes were surprisingly bright and quick beneath the shadow of the battered hat.

"Hully Chee!" exclaimed the Spider, expectorating contemptuously, "hark to the flossy-boy, fellers! Aw, run away, now!" said he, scowling suddenly, "run away before ye get slapped on th' wrist!" and, while divers of his companions laughed hoarsely, he turned a contemptuous back on Mr. Ravenslee. But even then he was seized in iron fingers that clutched his shoulder and, in that painful grip, was jerked suddenly around again to behold a face vicious-eyed, thin-lipped, square-jawed, fiercely outthrust. Recognising the "fighting-face", the Spider,

being a fighter of a large and varied experience, immediately " covered up ", and fell into that famous crouch of his that had proved the undoing of so many doughty fighters ere now. Then, like a flash, his long arm shot out, but in that same instant, Ravenslee, timing the blow to a fraction, moved slightly, and the Spider's knuckles bruised themselves against the wall at the precise moment that Ravenslee's open hand flipped lightly on the side of the Spider's square, lean jaw.

The Spider drew back, staring from Ravenslee's tall, alert figure to his bruised knuckles and back again, while his companions stood by in mute and wide-eyed wonder.

" Spider," said Ravenslee, shaking his head in grave reproof, " you were rather slow that time — very foolish to leave your point uncovered and offer me your jaw like that, you know! "

Five pairs of eyes stared at the speaker with a new and suddenly awakened interest, and beholding in him that lithe assurance of poise, that indefinable air that bespeaks the trained pugilist and which cannot be mistaken, elbows were nudged, and heads wagged knowingly.

Ravenslee's grey eyes were shining, and his pale cheeks tinged with colour.

" Ah, Spider," said he, " life is rather worth while after all, is n't it? Spider, I like you better and better; come, don't be a surly Spider, shake hands! "

" T' hell wid youse! " growled the Spider, covering up again, and, though his face was sulky yet was no trace of contempt there now.

" I suppose," mused Ravenslee, looking him over with knowledgeful eye, " yes, I judge, as you are now, you would fight about seven or eight pounds over your ringside weight. You 'd have to give me eighteen pounds! Spider — I could eat you! Come, shake hands and let 's go and fetch Spike."

Now, speaking, Ravenslee smiled, with eyes as well as lips; beholding which, the Spider grew slowly upright, his knotted fists unclenched, and, staring Ravenslee in the

eyes, he reached out slowly and by degrees and grasped the proffered hand.

"Say," said he, falling to violent mastication of his eternal chewing gum, "who 'd you have d' mitts on with last — an' when?"

"Oh, it seems ages ago!" sighed Ravenslee. "But where 's Spike?"

"Say, bo, who wants him, an' whaffor? Spike 's me pal, see, so I jest shore wants ter savvy who wants him an' why?"

"His sister —"

"Hully Chee! Why did n't youse say so at first? When Miss Hermione wants anything she 's gotta have it, I guess! Ain't that right, fellers?"

"You bet," chimed the four.

"So if she wants d' Kid, I guess I 'll jest have to fetch him for her. Come on, bo! S' long, fellers!"

Hereupon, having acknowledged the friendly salutes of the four, Ravenslee followed the Spider out into the court, empty now and silent.

"Say, bo, where 'd you meet up wid Spike, anyway?" enquired the Spider, as they strode along Tenth Avenue. "You don't belong around here, do ye?"

"No. Do you know where he was last night?"

"You can search me, bo. All I savvy is he was off on some frame-up or other."

"Who with?"

"Well — not wid me."

"Did you see any one with him besides M'Ginnis at O'Rourke's?"

"No, there was only them two."

"Ah, I guessed as much," said Ravenslee, nodding; "he went away with M'Ginnis — good!"

"Say, bo," questioned the Spider when they had gone some way in silence, "I ain't seen you fight anywheres, have I?"

"No, but I 've seen you, Spider. I saw you beat Larry McKinnon at 'Frisco."

"Which sure was some fight!" nodded the Spider. "Them half-arm jolts of his sure shook me some; he 'd have got me in th' third if I had n't clinched."

"He was a terror at in-fighting."

"He sure was, bo!"

"It was your jabbing and footwork won you the fight, Spider, one of the best I 've ever seen — very little clinching and clean breakaways."

"Larry sure was game all through, yes — right up to the knock-out. A good, clean fighter. 'N' say, bo, I was real sorry to see him counted out."

"It meant a big purse for you, I remember."

"Oh, sure, I had money to burn. I ain't got much left now, though," said the Spider ruefully.

"You came pretty near being a world's champion, Spider."

"Aw — jest near enough t' miss it, I guess. Talkin' o' champeens, the greatest of 'em, th' best fightin' man as ever swung a mitt, I reckon was Joe Madden, as retired years ago. Nobody could ever lick Joe Madden."

"Did you know him?"

"Not me, bo, I was n't in his class. But I seen him fight years ago."

"Do you think Spike will ever make a champion?" enquired Ravenslee suddenly. "I mean if he were given every chance?"

"Well," answered the Spider slowly, "he sure has the grit; ther ain't nothin' on two legs he 's afraid of except — himself, bo. He 's too high-strung. Nerves is his trouble, I reckon. Why, Chee! When he 's in d' ring he can't be still a minute, can't let himself rest between rounds, see? He kinder beats himself, I guess."

"I know what you mean," nodded Ravenslee, "and I 'm sure you 're right. By the way, have you ever seen M'Ginnis fight?"

"I seen him scrap once or twice — he 's sure ugly in a rough-house, but in th' ring — well, I dunno!"

"Has he a punch?"

"Bo, he 's got a sleep-pill in each mitt if — if he can land his wallop right! Yes, siree, if Bud can hit a guy where it 'll do most good, that guy 's sure goin' to forget his cares an' troubles for a bit. But he 's slow an' heavy, Bud is, though I ain't never seen him mix it in th' ring, mind."

"H'm," said Ravenslee thoughtfully, "M'Ginnis seems to have it all his own way around here — why?"

"Well, because Bud 's Bud, an' because Bud's old man is a Tammany boss — which gives Bud a big pull wid d' police. 'Nuff said, I guess."

"Quite!" nodded Ravenslee, and walked thereafter deeper in thought than ever. "Where are you taking me?" he enquired, as they turned a sudden corner.

"To d' river!"

"This is Eleventh Avenue, then?"

"Yep! Watch out you don't trip on d' railroad tracks." And now the Spider seemed to have become thoughtful also, and somewhat gloomy, judging by his face as seen by an occasional feeble light as they traversed the unlovely thoroughfare.

"Bo," said he suddenly, "I 'm thinkin' there 's some guys in this world as would be better out of it. I 'm thinkin' of some guy as got a little girl into trouble — an' left her to it. Her kid died, an' her folks turned her out, an' she 'd have died too, I guess, if it had n't been for Miss Hermione an' old Mother Trapes — ye see, she was all alone, poor little kid! Now a man as would treat a girl that ways ain't got no right t' live, I reckon. I should like t' know who that guy was! I should like t' meet that guy — once!"

After this the Spider became more gloomy than ever and spoke only in surly monosyllables. Suddenly he turned off along a narrow, ill-lighted alleyway that led them between divers small mean houses and tall, dark warehouses and brought them suddenly out upon the misty foreshore beyond which the dim and mighty river flowed. On they went, the Spider's depression growing perceptibly,

until at last their feet trod the rough planking of a narrow causeway which ended in a dark, raft-like structure moored out in the river. Here was a small and dismal shack from whose solitary window a feeble ray of light beamed.

Ravenslee shivered suddenly and stopped to stare about him while his listless hands changed to tight-clenched fists.

What was it?

What was there about this dismal, silent place that seemed to leap at him all at once from the dimness, he knew not whence? Was it the shack with its solitary light, or the broad river lapping with soft sighings and low weeping sounds among the piles below, or was it something in the altered aspect of the guiding figure that led him forward, slow and ever slower, as if with dragging feet, and yet with feet that trod so softly?

"Spider," said he at last, speaking in hushed and breathless manner, "Spider — where are we?" and speaking he shivered again, even while his clenched hand wiped the sweat from his brow. The Spider made no answer, for the feeble light was blotted out by a very solid something which, approaching softly, resolved itself into a burly, blue-clad form whose silver buttons and shield showed conspicuous.

"What 's doin'!" demanded a voice. "Who is it?" The voice was hoarse and authoritative, but the gruff tones were schooled, it seemed, to an almost unnatural softness.

"'S all right, Micky," answered the Spider in the same subdued tone, "it 's only me come for d' Kid."

"Who you got wid you there, Spider?"

"A pal o' mine an' d' Kid's — he 's all right, Mick!" Then to Ravenslee: "Come on, bo!" Slowly they approached the shack, but, reaching the door, the Spider hesitated a long moment ere, lifting the latch, he led the way in.

A fairly large room was lighted by a lamp that stood upon a rickety table before which sat a young-faced, white-haired man, very industriously writing in a small

account book; upon the table before him were a number of articles very neatly arranged, among which Ravenslee noticed a cheap wrist-watch, a hair-comb, a brooch, and a small chain purse. He was yet gazing at these and at the white-haired man, who, having nodded once to the Spider, continued to write so busily, when he was startled to hear a long-drawn, shuddering sigh. Turning suddenly sharp about, he stared toward a dark corner where, among a litter of oars, misshapen bundles, boxes, and odds and ends, was a small stove, and, crouched above it, his head between his hands, he beheld Spike.

With the same instinctive feeling that he must be silent, Ravenslee approached the boy and touched him on the shoulder. Spike started and glanced up, though without lifting his head.

"Your sister is anxious about you. Why are you here?"

"Don't you know, Geoff? Ain't no one told ye?"

"What do you mean?"

"I 'll show ye!"

The boy took a hurricane lamp from the floor beside him, and, having lighted it, brought Ravenslee further into that littered corner where, among the boxes and bundles and other oddments, lay what seemed to be two or three oars covered with a worn tarpaulin.

"Look, Geoff — you remember — only this morning!" Very gently he raised a corner of the tarpaulin and as he looked down, Ravenslee's breath caught suddenly.

A woman's face, very young and very placid-seeming! The long, dark hair framing the waxen features still oozed drops of water like great, slow-falling tears; and beholding this pale, still face, Ravenslee knew why he had shivered and hushed voice and step, and instinctively he bowed his uncovered head.

"You remember Maggie Finlay, Geoff, this morning, on the stairs? She — she kissed me good-by, said she was goin' away; this is what she meant — the river, Geoff! She 's drowned herself, Geoff! Oh, my God!" and letting

fall the tarpaulin, Spike was shaken suddenly by fierce hysterical sobbing; whereat the man, looking up from his writing, spoke harsh-voiced.

"Aw, quit it, Kid, quit it! Here I 've just wrote down three rings, and she 's only got one, an' that a cheap fake. Shut up, Kid, you 'll make me drop blots next! Cut it out, it ain't as if she was your sister — " Hereupon Spike started and lifted a twitching face.

"My sister!" he repeated, "my sister — whatcher mean? My God, Chip, Hermy could never — come to — that!" And shivering violently, Spike turned and stumbled out of the shack. Once outside, Ravenslee set his long arm about him and felt the lad still trembling violently.

"Why, Spike!" said he, "buck up, old fellow!"

"Oh, Geoff, Hermy could never — "

"No, no — of course not!" So very silently, together and side by side, they crossed the narrow causeway.

"Gee, but I 'm cold!" said the boy between chattering teeth as they turned along the wide avenue, "I — I guess it 's shook me some, Geoff. Y' see, I used to go to school with Maggie once — and now — "

Reaching Mulligan's at last, they beheld numerous groups of whispering folk who thronged the little court, the doorway, and the hall beyond; they whispered together upon the stairs and murmured on dim landings. But as Ravenslee and Spike, making their way through these groups, mounted upward, they found one landing very silent and deserted, a landing where was a certain battered door whose dingy panels had been wetted with the tears of a woman's agony, had felt the yearning, heartbroken passion of a woman's quivering lips such a very few hours ago. Remembering which, Geoffrey Ravenslee, turning to look at this grimy door, beheld it vague and blurred and indistinct as he turned and climbed that much-trodden stair.

Upon the top landing they found Mrs. Trapes, who leaned over the rails to greet them.

"So you found that b'y, Mr. Geoffrey. Hermy 'll be glad. You 'll have heard of poor little Maggie Finlay? Poor lass — poor, lonely lass! 'T was her father drove her to it, an' now he 's had a fit — a stroke, the doctor 's with him now — an' Hermy, of course! She 's always around where trouble is. I guess there won't be much rest for her to-night — long past midnight now! I 'm glad you found that b'y. I said you would. I 'll jest go down and tell Hermy; she 'll be glad."

Spike stood awhile after Mrs. Trapes had gone downstairs, very silent and with head a-droop, then, slow and heavily, turned and opened his door, but paused to speak over his shoulder in a hoarse whisper.

"Geoff — if ever — any man — made my sister go through what Maggie Finlay went through — I 'd — shoot him dead — by God in Heaven, I would!"

CHAPTER X

TELLS HOW MR. RAVENSLEE WENT INTO TRADE

It was a week later, and Mr. Ravenslee leaned from the window of his room to observe the view, which consisted chiefly of dingy brick walls and dingier windows, swaying vistas of clothes in various stages of dampness, clothes that fluttered from many lines stretched across the court, from window to window, at different altitudes; for to-day it had been washing day in Mulligan's; also the evening was warm.

So Mr. Ravenslee lounged and smoked and gazed upon the many garments, viewing them with eyes of reverie. Garments, these, of every size and hue and shape and for either sex, garments that writhed and contorted themselves in fantastic dances when gently stirred by a small, cool wind which, wafting across the river from the green New Jersey shore, breathed faintly of pine woods.

He was yet in absorbed contemplation of the aerial gambols of these many garments when to him came Mrs. Trapes, clutching a hot iron.

"Mr. Geoffrey, what 'll you eat for supper?" she demanded.

"Mrs. Trapes, what do you suppose I 'm worthy of?"

"How about a lovely piece o' liver?"

"Liver!" he repeated, rubbing a square, smooth-shaven chin. "Hum! liver sounds a trifle clammy, does n't it? Clammy and cold, Mrs. Trapes!"

"Cold?" said she, staring, "cold — of course not! It would be nice an' hot, with thick gravy an' a tater or so. An' as for clammy, who ever heard o' liver as was n't? Calves' liver, mind! They can't put me off with sheep's

— no, siree! Skudder's young man tried to once — he did so!"

"Foolish, foolhardy young man!" murmured Ravenslee.

"Mr. Geoffrey," sighed Mrs. Trapes, and her elbows were particularly needle-like, "I jest took that piece o' sheep's liver an' wrapped it round that young man's face."

"Unhappy young man!" murmured Mr. Ravenslee.

"Y' see, Mr. Geoffrey, though a widder an' therefore lorn, I ain't to be trod on in the matter of livers, or anything else!"

"I 'm sure of it, Mrs. Trapes."

"But if you don't kind of fancy liver, how about sassiges? Sassiges is tasty an' filling, an' cheap. What d' ye say to sassiges?"

"Sausages," answered Mr. Ravenslee, shaking grave head, "sausages demand such unbounded faith in the — er — sausagee — or should it be sausage-or?"

"Oh, well — a chop, cut thick an' with a kidney in it — what d' ye say to a chop, now?"

"No, a chop in an hour, Mrs. Trapes, or say, two hours, will be most welcome. Are you very busy?"

"Washing 's all done, but there 's a lot o' your shirts waiting to be ironed — an' me here, lettin' me iron get cold!"

"Oh, never mind the shirts, Mrs. Trapes! Pray sit down; I need your counsel and advice."

"But me iron?"

"Give it to me — there!" and Mr. Ravenslee deposited it outside on the fire escape.

"Now Mrs. Trapes," said he, "first of all, I must find work. 'Man is born to labour, as the sparks fly upward,' you know."

"Born to sorrer, you mean!" she corrected.

"Precisely," he nodded, "work is sorrow, and sorrow is work — at least, I know a good many people who think so."

"More fools them!" quoth Mrs. Trapes, folding her arms.

"My own idea exactly!" he answered, lazily tapping out his pipe on the window sill.

"I ain't noticed you sweating none, lately!" quoth Mrs. Trapes sarcastically.

"Alas, no, Mrs. Trapes, there being no wherefore to call forth the aforesaid — er — moisture. Still, 'man is as grass that withereth' unless he 'goeth forth unto his labour.'"

"An' quite right too!" nodded Mrs. Trapes. "If I had my way I 'd make 'em all work!"

"That would be rather hard on our legislators and Fifth Avenue parsons, would n't it? Anyway, I want work, that 's sure!"

"Y' mean as your money 's all gone?"

"Very nearly," sighed Mr. Ravenslee with a suitable air of dejection. And he did it so well that Mrs. Trapes, viewing him askance, frowned, bit her lip, wriggled her elbows, and finally spoke.

"Are ye up against it good, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"I am!"

"Well," said she, frowning down at the vivid-coloured hearthrug, "I got twenty-five dollars put away as I 've pinched and scrinched to save, but if you want the loan of 'em, you can have 'em an' welcome."

Her lodger was silent; indeed, he was so long in answering that at last Mrs. Trapes looked up, to find him regarding her with a very strange expression.

"And you will lend me your savings?" he asked her softly.

"Sure I will!" And she would have risen then and there but that he stayed her.

"God bless you for a generous soul!" said he, and laughed rather queerly; also his grey eyes were a little brighter than usual. "Why should you trust me so far?"

"Well, you look honest, I guess. An' then we all help each other in Mulligan's now an' then, one way or another; we jest have to. There 's Mrs. Bowker, third floor — the

tea an' sugar as I 've loaned that woman — an' last week a lovely beef-bone! Well, there! But if you want the loan of that twenty-five — "

"Mrs. Trapes, I don't. Things are n't so desperate as that yet. All I need is a job of some sort."

"What kind o' job?"

"I 'm not particular."

"Well — what have you been used to?"

"Alas, Mrs. Trapes, hitherto I have lived a life of — er — riotous ease!"

"That means as you ain't worked at all, I guess. Hm!" said Mrs. Trapes, viewing him with her sharp, hawk's eye, "and yet you ain't got the look of a confidence man nor yet a swell crook, consequently I take it you was the only son of your father an' lost all he left you, eh?"

"Mrs. Trapes, you are a truly wonderful woman!"

"T' be born the only son of a rich father is a pretty bad disease, I reckon!" she continued, "yes, siree, it 's bad for the child an' worse for the man; it 's bound to be his ruination in the end — like drink! And talkin' o' drink, I 'm glad to see that b'y Arthur 's so fond o' you."

"Oh, why?"

"Because you don't drink."

"Well, I don't go to bed in my boots, do I, Mrs. Trapes? But then I promised you I would n't, and, for another thing, I 'm not a poet, you see," said he and yawned lazily.

"Hermy says she 's glad too."

Mr. Ravenslee cut short his yawn in the middle.

"Hermione? Did she say so? When?"

"Ah, I guessed that would wake ye up a bit!" said Mrs. Trapes, noting his suddenly eager look. "It 's a pity you 're so poor, ain't it?"

"Why? What do you mean?"

"I mean if you had been in a good situation an' making good money — twenty-five per, say — you might have asked her."

"Asked her?" repeated Ravenslee, staring, "asked her what?"

"Why, t' marry you, o' course," nodded Mrs. Trapes. "You love her about as much as any man can love — which is sometimes a thimbleful an' sometimes a bit more — but you sure love her as much as a man knows how, I guess. An' don't try for ter deny it, Mr. Geoffrey, I ain't blind, leastways I can see a bit out o' one eye sometimes — specially where Hermy 's concerned, I can so. Of course, you ain't worthy of her — but then no man is, to my mind!"

"No, I 'm not worthy of her, God knows!" said Ravenslee, quite humbly.

"An' Hermy 's goin' to marry a man with money. Her heart 's set on it — firm!"

"Money!" said Ravenslee, scowling. "She seems anything but mercenary."

"Mercenary!" cried Mrs. Trapes, "I should say not! I tell ye, she could be a-rollin' around in a six-thousand-dollar automobile at this very hour if she was that kind. With her face an' figure! She could so!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean as there 's men — rich men, an' married too — as is mad after her — "

"Ah!" said Ravenslee, frowning again.

"You may well say 'ah!'" nodded Mrs. Trapes. "Men is all beasts more or less! Why, I could tell you things — well, there! Hermy ain't no innocent babe but there 's some things better than innocence an' that 's a chin — will-power, Mr. Geoffrey. If a woman 's sweet an' strong an' healthy like Hermy, an' got a chin — nothin' can harm her. But beauty like hers is a curse to any good woman if she 's poor, beauty being a quick-seller, y' see!"

"Yes, I see — I know!" said Ravenslee, clenching his hands and frowning blacker than ever.

"But," continued Mrs. Trapes, and here she leaned forward to touch him with an impressive, toil-worn hand,

"Hermy Chesterton 's jest a angel o' light an' purity; she always has been an' always will be, but she knows about as much as a good girl can know. She 's seen the worst o' poverty, an' she 's made up her mind, when she marries, to marry a man as is a man an' can give her all the money she wants. So y' see it ain't no good you wastin' your time danglin' around after her an' sighin' — now is it?"

"Why, no, Mrs. Trapes, I think I 'll speak to her to-night —"

"My land! ain't I jest been tryin' to show you as you ain't a fit or worthy party to speak, an' as you won't have a chance if you do speak, her 'eart bein' set on wealth? But you can't speak — you won't speak — I know you won't!"

"Why not?"

"First, because t' night she 's away at Englewood makin' a dress for Mrs. Crawley as is very fond of her. An' second, because you ain't the man to ask a girl to marry him when he ain't got nothin' t' keep her on — you know you ain't!"

"Which brings us back to the undoubted fact that I must get a job — at once."

"Hm!" said Mrs. Trapes, viewing his clean-cut features and powerful figure with approval, "what could y' do?"

"Anything, so long as I can make good, Mrs. Trapes. What should you suggest?"

"Well," said Mrs. Trapes, caressing an elbow thoughtfully, "grocers' assistants makes good money — an' I know Mr. Smith wants a butterman."

"Good," nodded Ravenslee, "I should like to batter butter about —"

"Are ye used to butter?"

"Oh, I 've a decided taste for it!"

"Know much about it?"

"Certainly — it is a yellowish, fatty substance concocted by human agency supposedly from the lacteous

secretion of the graminivorous quadruped familiarly known as the common (or garden) cow."

"Land sakes!" said Mrs. Trapes, drawing a deep breath, "you sure do know something about it. Ever worked in it before?"

"Only with my teeth."

"Oh — quit your jollying, Mr. Geoffrey, if you want me t' help you!"

"Solemn as an owl, Mrs. Trapes!"

"Well, then, there 's Jacob Pffeffenfifer wants a young man in his delicatessen store."

"Mrs. Trapes, I can slice ham and beef with any one on earth."

"D' ye understand picklin' and seasonin'?"

"Ah, there you have me again; I fear I don't."

"Then you ain't no good to Jacob Pffeffenfifer!"

"On second thoughts, I 'm not wholly sorry," answered Ravenslee gravely. "You see, a name like that would worry me, it would shake my nerve; I might cut beef instead of ham, or ham instead of — "

"Mr. Geoffrey!" quoth Mrs. Trapes, squaring her elbows.

"Sober as a judge, Mrs. Trapes and — by Jupiter!"

"My land! What is it?"

"An idea — look!" and Ravenslee pointed down into the yard.

"Why, it 's only Tony!" said Mrs. Trapes, glancing down a vista of riotous garments.

"Precisely," answered Ravenslee, rising and stretching his long arms, "Tony has solved my difficulty; I 'll go into the peanut trade."

"What? Sell peanuts? You?"

"Why not? 'Man is born — ' you know."

"But — my land! Only dagos and guinneys sells peanuts!"

"Splendid! I shall be the exception, Mrs. Trapes. Anyway, a peanut man I 'll be!" And catching up his disreputable hat, Ravenslee nodded and left his landlady

staring after him and murmuring "well!" at intervals. Presently she reached for her iron, stone-cold long since, and stood awhile clutching it in bony fingers and staring at nothing in particular.

"He 's sure a man, Hermy my dear!" she said at last, nodding at the stuffed parrot in the corner. "I 've watched him careful and I know. And there 's some things better than money, my dear — ah, much better! So if I should help to bring you into his arms — man an' wife, my dear — why, I guess it would be the best thing Anne Angelina Trapes ever done — yes, mam!" Saying which, she went back to her ironing.

On the stairs Ravenslee met Spike, who hailed him joyously.

"Say, Geoff, I 'm all alone to-night; come an' eat supper with me — how about it?"

"Suppose you have supper at Mrs. Trapes' with me?"

"No, she gets on me nerves — so come on over, will you?"

"With pleasure."

"'N' say, I 'm a few chips shy on butter, Geoff — bring in ten cents' worth, will you?"

"Right, O comrade, I 'll be with you anon. Make boil the kettle against my coming," and Ravenslee hastened down the stairs. Reaching the court he met the Italian trundling his barrow toward a certain shed, its usual nocturnal biding place.

"How goes it, Tony?" he enquired, shaking hands.

The Italian nodded and flashed his teeth. "Ver-a good, pal!" he answered.

"Tony, where can I get a peanut outfit like yours?"

"Ha! You go-a in-a da peanut-a beezneez, hey? You want-a push-a de cart, hey?"

"That 's it, Tony."

"Ver-a good!" nodded the good-natured Italian. "You come-a long-a me, pal. I take-a you get-a push-a-de-cart, up-a de street, yes?" Having very soon locked away his barrow, the loquacious Tony led Ravenslee

along certain streets and into a certain yard, where presently appeared a stout man with rings in his ears, who smiled and nodded and greeted them with up-flung finger and the word "altro." Presently Ravenslee found himself examining a highly ornate barrow fitted with stove and outfit complete, even unto the whistle, and mounted upon a pair of the rosiest wheels he had ever seen. Thereafter were more smiles and nods, accompanied by the ever recurrent "altro", the transfer of certain bills into the stout man's pocket, and Geoffrey Ravenslee sallied forth into the street, bound for Mulligan's, with the chattering Tony beside him and the gaily-painted barrow before him, receiving many friendly hints as to the pitfalls and intricacies of the peanut trade and hearkening with unflagging interest to the story of "lil Pietro" and the unbounded goodness of "da Signorina Hermione."

CHAPTER XI

ANTAGONISM IS BORN AND WAR DECLARED

"WHY — hello, Hermy!" exclaimed Spike, pausing in the doorway. "Gee, I thought you was — were in Englewood."

Hermione lifted her golden head, stayed her humming sewing-machine, and smiled at him.

"And I thought I 'd come home and surprise you. Are n't you glad to see me, boy dear?"

"Why, sure I am!" he answered, and stooping, kissed a golden curl that wantoned at her white temple; which done, he sprawled in the easy-chair and taking a newspaper from his pocket, fell to studying the latest baseball scores while Hermione, head bent above her work again, glanced at him now and then rather wistfully.

"Gee whiz," he exclaimed suddenly, "the Giants put it all over Cincinnati to-day, Hermy. Y' see, Matty was in th' box, an' he sure pitched some game!"

Hermione stopped her machine and looked at him under wrinkling brows.

"I thought you were hunting through the 'wanted' columns, Arthur?"

"Why, y' see I ain't — have n't got to the ads yet, Hermy."

Hermione sighed softly and, resting her round chin in her hands, viewed him silently awhile until, becoming aware of the steadfast gaze of those sweet and gentle eyes, Spike shuffled uneasily and changed colour.

"Arthur," she said softly, "when you promised me to try and find a situation you meant it, did n't you?"

"Sure I did!"

"That was a week ago, dear."

"But, Hermy, I went after that office-boy's job — you know I did!"

"Yes, dear, though you got there too late."

"No, I was n't late, Hermy, only another guy happened t' get there first — an' got the job! A kid I could have licked with one hand, too. One of these mommer's pets in a nobby sack suit — all dolled up in a clean collar an' a bow-tie an' grey kid gloves. I guess his outfit helped him a whole lot — an' y' see I 'm a few chips shy on clothes, I guess."

Hermione looked at her brother's worn garments, shiny at elbow and knee, and as she looked, her eyes were suddenly suffused.

"Yes, dear, I — I 'm afraid they are — rather shabby," she admitted humbly. "Your clothes always did seem to wear out so very quickly! And — and it costs so much to live! And — sometimes I grow — afraid — "

The smooth, low voice faltered and ended upon a sob. Spike stared in wide-eyed amaze, for seldom had he seen his sister thus, but now, beholding the droop of that brave head, seeing how her strong white hands gripped each other, he tossed the paper aside, and flinging himself on his knees clasped her in his arms.

"Don't cry, Hermy!" he pleaded. "Oh, don't cry, I — I can't bear it. You know I love you best in the world — ah, don't cry, dear. I — I 'll hunt up a job first thing — honest I will — "

"But your clothes are so very shabby!" she sobbed, "and oh, boy dear, I have only just enough to — pay our rent this month — so I can't get you any more — yet, dear!"

"Hermy," said he brokenly, "oh, Hermy, you make me feel so mean I — I — One sure thing you 're never goin' t' spend your money on clothes for me any more — the money you work so hard for! Never any more,

Hermy dear. You 've done enough for me, I guess, an' now it 's up t' me to help you and — and — oh, Gee!" Here Spike's voice broke altogether, whereupon Hermione, quite forgetting her own sorrows and worries, fell to soothing and comforting him as she had done many and many a time during his motherless childhood.

"Say, Hermy," said he at last, his tear-stained cheek pillowed on her soft, round bosom, "you won't think me a — an awful kid for — for cryin', will you?"

"I think I love you all the better, boy dear, and — I 'm sure it has done us both good," and, smiling down at him through her tears, she kissed him.

"I 'll start in an' rustle up a job right away, Hermy!" said he, rising and nodding grimly.

"Oh, boy," said she, looking up at him fondly, "I shall be so proud of you. It would n't matter what it was, or how little you got at first, so long as it was decent and honourable. And I 'm sure you 'll get on — Mr. Geoffrey thinks so too."

"Does he? I 'm glad o' that. Say, how d' ye like Geoff?"

"Oh — well, I 've only seen him two or three times," said Hermione, folding away her work preparatory to cooking supper.

"Is that all?" said Spike, smoothing out the paper and scowling at the long columns headed "Help Wanted."

"Ye-es, I think so."

"But you an' him 's always meetin' on the stairs, ain't — are n't you?"

"You should say 'he and you', dear."

"Well — but are n't you?"

"We have met — once or twice."

"D' ye like him?"

"Well, he 's so very — different! And rather lazy! And awfully sleepy! And yet I don't think he 's sleepy really, somehow."

"Sleepy?" exclaimed Spike. "Well, I guess not! Lazy I dunno, but he sure is all to the wide-awake-o.

When he looks sleepiest, I guess he 's widest-awakest. And he ain't a — is n't a bad looker, is he? "

" He has nice eyes! " Hermione admitted.

" Oh, I don't mean his eyes! " quoth Spike disgustedly. " I mean his arms an' legs an' shoulders."

" They are nice and wide! " nodded Hermione.

" I should like t' see Geoff in th' ring. He 'd strip big! "

" Oh, really," said Hermione, taking a very large apron from the table drawer. " Boy, dear, I do wish you were n't always thinking of fighting."

" All right, Hermy dear. But there ain't no flies on Geoff — 'n' say, I want yer to like him 'cause I kinder think he 's all to the cream-puffs an' — "

" Arthur! " cried Hermione, lifting an admonishing finger.

" I 'm sorry; my tongue kinder slipped, Hermy. But I have been trying t' keep tabs on me talk, honest I have."

" Yes, dear. You have n't been quite so frightful lately."

" Y' see, Hermy, you 're different; you went to a swell school an' — "

" And you never did — I know, dear. But oh, Arthur, I did the best I could."

" And a lot better than I deserved," said he, reaching out to pat her hand caressingly. " When I get a good job, I 'll stay in nights and study hard like you want me to — I sure will."

" Yes, dear, and you 'll soon be heaps cleverer than I am," said she, stooping to kiss his curly head as she tied the apron about her shapely hips; and then, giving him a smiling nod, she vanished into the kitchen, while Spike laboured through the long columns headed " Help Wanted." And presently, as she moved light-footed to and fro in the kitchen, he heard her singing softly to herself, an old, old song of other days that had often been his lullaby when he was a small, motherless armful of sleepiness hushed in her young, protecting clasp.

"Arthur!" she called.

"Hello!" he answered.

"Are you hungry?"

"You bet I am!"

A long pause, whereafter ensued the following conversation between kitchen and parlour:

HERMIONE. "Boy dear!"

SPIKE. "Hello!"

HERMIONE. "Be a dear and lay the cloth for me!"

SPIKE. "Right-o!"

A longer pause, during which Spike rises and takes cloth from sideboard drawer.

HERMIONE. "Arthur!"

SPIKE. "Yes?"

HERMIONE. "Where did you meet him?"

SPIKE (starting). "Who?"

HERMIONE. "Mr. Geoffrey. How did you happen to meet each other?"

Another pause, while Spike stands frowning in perplexed thought.

SPIKE. "Where did you say the cloth was?"

HERMIONE. "In the sideboard drawer. How long have you known him?"

SPIKE (beginning to lay the cloth feverishly). "Oh, a goodish time. Say, Hermy, he sure likes your name a whole lot!"

HERMIONE. "Oh!" (A very small pause.) "Likes my name, does he?"

SPIKE. "He sure does. He told me so."

HERMIONE. "Oh!" (Another small pause.) "Just what did he say, boy dear?"

SPIKE. "He said it was Greek an' very beautiful, an' then I said it kind of fitted you because you were aces up on the face an' figure question."

A rush of petticoats, and enter Hermione, flushed and laughing.

"You dear boy!" she cried, "for that you shall be kissed!" which he was forthwith; after which she turned

to the mirror to smooth back a shining tress of hair — that same rebellious curl that glistened above her fine, black eyebrow.

"Where did you say you first met him — Mr. Geoffrey?" she enquired suddenly, still busied with the rebellious curl. Spike started, and glanced uneasily at her shapely back.

"Say, Hermy," said he, a little huskily, "have you got anything for supper?"

"Not much, dear, I 'm afraid."

"That 's a pity!"

"Why?"

"Oh, because I asked him in to supper."

"You asked Mr. Geoffrey — here?" she gasped.

"Surest thing you know. Y' see, I thought you was staying over at Englewood."

"Oh, Arthur!" she sighed. "And there are only two wretched little chops! And not a bit of butter! And the rent 's due to-morrow — I can't spare a cent — and me in this shabby old gown! and you broke the best teapot."

"Sounds kind of gay an' festive!" sighed Spike ruefully. "But don't worry about the eats, dear. Geoff won't mind, an' he 'll never notice your old gown — "

"He seems to notice a great deal," said Hermione doubtfully as she hastily untied the big apron, "and besides — oh, gracious goodness!" she cried, as a knock sounded at the front door, "you must let him in, Arthur — and don't let him know I 'm changing my gown!" Saying which, she vanished into her bedroom while Spike hastened to the door.

"Why — hello, Tony!" he exclaimed, "what 's wrong now?"

"My lil Pietro," cried the Italian excitedly, "he no sleep — he burn-a burn-a all-a da time, — all-a da time cry! You tell-a you sis — she come-a like-a da las' time den he no cry-a — " But here Tony broke off to flourish his hat and bow gracefully as he caught sight of Hermione herself. "Ah, Signorina!" he cried, "my lil Pietro he

seeck. You please-a come see my lil Pietro? He flush-a he cry — he all-a da fire! he burn-a, burn-a, like-a da fire! You so good, so generosa — you come see my lil Pietro?"

"Why, of course I will!" said Hermione in her calm, soft voice, "poor little mite — is he feverish?"

"Si, si Signorina!" answered the anxious young father, "he burn-a, burn-a all-a da time!"

"Reach me the aconite, boy dear; yes, that's it."

"But what about supper, Hermy?" queried Spike wistfully.

"Oh, well — finish laying the table; I'll be back as soon as ever I can, dear."

"Oh, Gee!" sighed Spike, as their footsteps died away down the stair, "she sure is keen on knowing how I met Geoff! And if she ever finds out —" Spike cowered down into a chair and clasping his head between his hands sat thus a long while, staring moodily at the floor, striving for a way out of the difficulty. He was yet wrestling with this knotty problem when he heard muffled knocks at the front door, which, being opened, disclosed the object of his thoughts.

"Why, Geoff," he cried gladly, "I thought you was n't coming. Say, what you got there?" he enquired, for Ravenslee's arms were filled with sundry packages and parcels.

"Come and see!" said Ravenslee mysteriously. "Catch this one before I drop it!"

"Why — hello," said Spike, sniffing at the package in question as he led the way into the parlour, "it smells good! It sniffs like — Holy Gee, it's a roast turkey! And — oh, say, Geoff — she's a beaut!"

"Precisely what Mr. Pffeffenfifer assured me," said Ravenslee, depositing his other burdens on the table. "Mr. Pffeffenfifer is a man educated in eats, a food fancier, an artist of the appetite! Mr. Pffeffenfifer is fat and soulful! Mr. Pffeffenfifer nearly wept tears over the virtues of that bird — pledged his mortal soul for its

tenderness, vowed by all the gods it had breast enough for twins! Mr. Pffeffenfifer seemed so passionately attached to that bird that I feared he meant to keep it to gloat over in selfish secrecy. But no — base coin seduced him, did the trick and — here it is. Also we have a loaf!" and from beneath one arm Ravenslee dropped a package that resolved itself into a Vienna roll. "Also, ham — "

"Hey, Geoff," said Spike in awe-struck tones, "are all these eats?"

"Certainly. I should have brought more if I could have carried 'em."

"More?"

"Most decidedly. When I buy eats, my lad, I buy everything in sight that looks worth while — if Mr. Pffeffenfifer sells. Mr. Pffeffenfifer sells in such a soulfully seductive way that eats acquire virtues above and beyond their own base selves. Mr. Pffeffenfifer can infuse soul into a sausage. Behold now, eats the most alluring. See, what 's this! Ah, yes, here we have, item: Salmi, redolent of garlic! Here again a head cheese, succulent and savoury; here 's ham, most ravishingly pink — and a Camembert cheese."

"But, Jiminy Christmas — you bought such a lot of each. Who 's goin' t' eat all these?"

"We, of course!"

"But we can't eat 'em all!" sighed Spike.

"Can't we?" said Ravenslee, beginning to view the quantity of the numerous viands with dubious eyes. "They do seem rather a lot now I see 'em all together. But I 'm ravenous, and if we can't manage 'em, we 'll find some one who can."

"Y' see, Geoff, I shan't be able t' eat any o' the rest when I 'm through with the turk'!" sighed Spike, a little reproachfully. "My, but I 'm hungry! Strange how hungry cold turkey makes a guy!"

"Why, then," said Ravenslee, pitching his hat into a corner, "sit down, comrade, and 'let mirth with unconfined wing' — " Ravenslee yawned.

"I guess we 'd better wait a bit, Geoff."

"What for?"

"Hermy."

"Is she — do you mean she 's back?" enquired Ravenslee, sitting up.

"Yes, she did n't stay at Englewood; she 's downstairs, doctoring Tony's kid."

"But what will she think of all these confounded messes?"

"Messes!" cried Spike indignantly. "Cheese it, Geoff — look at that turk'!"

"But — do you think she 'll — mind?" enquired Ravenslee uneasily.

"Mind?" said Spike, staring. "Not on your life — why should she? Besides, it 's kind o' lucky you happened to blow in with this free lunch; she 's a bit shy on the dollar question this month — an' Mulligan comes t' morrow. An' oh, say, Geoff — she 's dead set on findin' out how I met you an' — an' where."

"Very naturally!" murmured Ravenslee.

"An' we must tell her something — but what?"

"Spike, you 've forgotten the mustard! And as for — er — lying to your sister, let our motto be 'sufficient unto the day.' Our present need is mustard, Spike."

"Say, this sure is goin' t' be some supper, Geoff!" said Spike, setting on the mustard and gazing at the array of edibles with shining eyes. "Gee, I could eat cold turkey all night!"

"Have we everything ready, Spike?"

"Except butter, Geoff."

"Ha! the one thing I forgot, of course! Cut off and get some like the good fellow you are!" and Ravenslee flicked a bill into Spike's hand, who, seizing his cap, promptly vanished. Being alone, Ravenslee crossed to the sideboard, and taking thence a certain photograph, seated himself in the easy-chair and fell to studying it with deep and grave attention. And sitting thus, he let fancy run riot — and fancy was singularly pleasing to judge by

the glow in his eyes and the tender smile that curved his lip.

He was lost deep within his dreams when he was aware of a loud knock upon the outer door which Spike had left unlatched and, replacing the photograph, he rose.

"Come in!" said he. A heavy step sounded in the little hall, the door was pushed open, and a man entered. He was a young man, big and broad-shouldered, and Ravenslee's keen eyes were quick to heed the length and ponderous carriage of the arms, the girth of chest, and firm, heavy poise of the feet; lastly he looked at the face, aggressively handsome with its dominating nose and chin, and blue eyes shaded by thick lashes, that looked out beneath heavy brows — a comely-seeming face from the dark, close-cropped hair to the deep cleft in the strong, fleshy chin.

But now, beneath Ravenslee's persistent regard, the full-curved, shapely lips grew slowly into a cruel, down-trending line, the nostrils expanded, while the blue eyes narrowed to shining slits beneath quick-scowling, black brows. For a long moment the two men stared at each other, eye to eye, then, in a hoarse, assertive tone the newcomer spoke.

"What you doin' here? Who are ye?"

Mr. Ravenslee sat down and began to fill his pipe.

"Where 's d' Kid?"

Mr. Ravenslee brushed stray grains of tobacco from his knee with elaborate care.

"Hey, you! Where 's Spike — 'n' what you doin' here, anyway?"

Mr. Ravenslee glanced up casually. "And pray, who the devil may you be pleased to be?" he enquired.

"Me name 's M'Ginnis!"

"Oh, indeed?"

"Yes — indeed! Bud M'Ginnis — Is that good 'nuff for ye?"

"Well, since you ask," said Ravenslee, shaking languid head, "I should scarcely class you as a 'bud' myself. No — I should say you were perhaps just a trifle — er —

overblown. But have it your own way!" and Mr. Ravenslee smiled engagingly.

"Where 's Spike?" demanded M'Ginnis, his tone a little gruffer, "and say — you can cut out the comedy, see? Nix on the funny business."

"You are a pessimist, I presume, Mr. Flowers?"

"Where 's d' Kid? Speak up now — where is he?"

"Also, your conversation grows a little monotonous, Mr. Flowers."

M'Ginnis stared, then shot out his big chin viciously.

"What you doin' in Hermy's flat, eh?"

Mr. Ravenslee's brows wrinkled slightly, but his soft voice grew softer, as, pausing in the act of lighting his pipe, he answered: "On the whole I think you are a rather — er — unpleasant young man, so suppose you — er — go —"

"What? Go? Are ye tryin' t' tell me t' go?"

"I 'm suggesting that you — er — crank up the machine, Mr. Flowers, and beat it while the going 's good!"

M'Ginnis clenched his fist and took a threatening step toward Ravenslee, then checked himself and stood breathing heavily.

"May I further suggest," said Ravenslee in his pleasantest voice, "that you look in again — say next Thursday fortnight, Mr. Flowers?"

"T' hell with you — me name 's M'Ginnis."

"Of course you might leave a message, Mr. Flowers —"

"Now, see here, you!" said M'Ginnis, his words coming thick with passion. "I wanter know, first, where Spike is. And then I wanter know who you are. And then I wanter know what you 're after in Hermy Chesterton's flat — and you 're sure goin' t' tell me!"

"Am I?"

"You sure are!"

Mr. Ravenslee opened the matchbox. "Seems a pity to shake a confidence so sublime," he sighed. "And yet —"

"An' see here again! I 've known Hermy since we was

kids, an' I don't allow no man t' come stamping around here — see? So you 're goin' t' quit, an' you 're goin' t' quit right now!"

"Do I look like a quitter, Mr. Flowers?"

Now beholding the speaker's lazy assurance of pose, the contemptuous indifference of his general air, M'Ginnis stood speechless a moment, his clenched fists quivering, while, above the loosely-tied scarf, his powerful neck seemed to swell and show knotted cords that writhed and twisted, and when at last he spoke, his words came in a panting rush.

"This is Hermy's flat, an' I guess — you think you 're safe here — but you ain't! I 'm thinkin' out which 'll do th' least harm to her furniture — to lick ye here or drag you out on to the landin' first!"

Mr. Ravenslee lounged lower in the armchair and yawned behind the box of matches. And in that moment, like a maddened animal, M'Ginnis leapt upon him and, striking no blow, seized and shook Ravenslee in powerful, frantic hands, while from between his lips, curled back from big, white teeth, came a continuous, vicious, hissing sound.

"I 'll wake ye up!" he panted. "Come out — come out, I say — oh, I 'll wake ye up when I get ye outside, I guess. Come out! What you doin' in Hermy's flat? By God! I 'll choke ye till you tell me!" and his hands came upon Ravenslee's throat — came to be met there by two other hands that, closing upon his wrists, wrenched and twisted viciously in opposite directions and, loosing his hold, M'Ginnis fell back, staring down at bruised and lacerated skin where oozed a few slow drops of blood.

"And now," said Ravenslee, rising, "after you, Mr. Flowers! Let us by all means step outside, where we will each earnestly endeavour to pitch the other down-stairs — personally, I shall do my very damnedest, for really I don't — no, I do not like you, Mr. Flowers; you need some one to tread on you a little. Step outside and let *me* try."

While M'Ginnis stared from his swelling, bloody wrists to Ravenslee's face — a face quite as fierce and determined as his own — steps were heard and Spike's voice called:

"Hermy come in yet, Geoff?"

"Not yet — but our friend Mr. Flowers has dropped in — socially, I fancy."

"Mr. Who?" enquired Spike at the door, but beholding M'Ginnis's angry face, he paused there, staring aghast. "Why — hello, Bud!" said he nervously. "What 's wrong?"

"Nothin' much — yet, Kid, only it 's kinder lucky for this guy as you happened in. Who is he? What 's he doin' here?"

"He 's only a friend o' mine, Bud, an' he 's all right, 'n' say — "

"Tell him t' beat it."

"But y' see, Bud — "

"Tell him as we don't want his kind around here or — "

"Spike, did you bring in the butter?" enquired Ravenslee, serenely unconscious of M'Ginnis.

"Yes, here it is, Geoff — but say — "

"It does n't feel much," said Ravenslee, weighing the package in his hand.

"It 's half a pound. But say, here 's Bud; he says you 're to — "

"My, Spike, I 'll trouble you for the butter-dish — thanks!" and turning away, Ravenslee busied himself at the table, whistling softly the while.

"But, Geoff, this is Bud!" cried the lad, glancing from one to the other in an agony of suspense. "Oh, don' ye know dis is Bud M'Ginnis?"

"Ah, still here, is he?" said Ravenslee, without looking round.

"See here, Kid," growled M'Ginnis, "you tell your — friend t' clear out an' t' do it real quick, see? You tell him if he ain't out in two minutes, I 'll run him out meself — "

"Spike, this butter is nearly oil."

"Oh, Geoff," groaned the boy, "you 've got t' go — here 's Bud — "

"Why, then, Spike, tell him to — er — chase himself; I 'm busy!" Came the sound of a chair set roughly aside and a shrill cry from Spike: "My God, Bud — don't! Look out, Geoff!"

But, as M'Ginnis came, Ravenslee turned swiftly, ducked the expected blow, and swinging his fist up beneath his assailant's extended arm, smote him hard and true upon the elbow; and Spike, pale and wide of eye, saw that arm fall and dangle helplessly at M'Ginnis' side, while his face was contorted with sharp agony.

"My God, Geoff! What you done t' him?"

"Pins and needles, Spike — that 's all. A hoary old trick, but useful now and then. Mr. Flowers is n't so very wide-awake as folks seem to think. You see, it would n't have done to knock him out here; he might have upset the table."

"Knock out Bud!" cried Spike, aghast. "But there ain't nobody can lick Bud M'Ginnis!"

"Oh, I don't know, Spike. Anyway, we 'll see what can be done — outside! After you, Mr. Flowers! Pray go first, Mr. Flowers! A fellow who would attack a man sitting down is n't to be trusted behind one — so, after you, Mr. Flowers. Oh, we 'll wait until you can use your arm, but we 'll wait outside. Miss Chesterton's flat is no place for your sort, so — out with you, and quick — d' ye hear?"

M'Ginnis opened his lips to retort, but passion choked him, and snarling unintelligibly, he turned and strode out upon the landing. As they stood fronting each other, very silent and grim and menacing, running feet were heard ascending the stairs, and a slender boy appeared, who, perceiving M'Ginnis, panted out:

"Say, Bud, O'Rourke 's been pinched by d' cops! He wants ye t' skin over an' fix it up — "

"O'Rourke pinched?" growled M'Ginnis. "Say you, Larry, what yer givin' me?"

"S' right, Bud, dere 's a noo captain on d' precinct, an' he 's pinched O'Rourke. 'N' say, Bud, d' game 's all balled up; d' push is all up in d' air. 'N' say, O'Rourke 's crazy an' can't do nothin', so he sent me t' fetch ye. You 're d' only one as can fix d' police, so come on right now before d' whole show 's busted up." During this breathless speech the narrowed eyes of M'Ginnis never left Ravenslee's pale, placid face, and in the persistence of this ferocious glare was something animal-like.

"Say, you — Mr. Butt-in!" said he, "I ain't through wid you — not by a whole lot I ain't. Oh, I 'll get ye yet, an' I 'll get ye good! There won't be nothin' left for nobody else when I 'm through wid you. Savvy this — there ain't nobody ever goin' t' queer me with Hermy Chesterton. Oh, I 'll get ye good, an' I 'll get ye — soon!"

So saying, Bud M'Ginnis turned, and went slowly and unwillingly down the stair.

"Gee, but I 'm glad he 's gone!" said Spike, as he closed the door. "Gee, but I 'm — glad!" and he drew a deep breath.

"So am I!" said Ravenslee, sinking into the armchair, "but there 's always to-morrow, is n't there?"

But instead of replying, Spike stood to stare on Ravenslee with eyes of admiring awe.

"I guess you know how t' handle y' self, Geoff," said he.

"I used to think I could, once upon a time," answered Ravenslee, stooping to recover his pipe.

"That sure was some wallop you handed him!"

"'T was fair, I thank you, comrade!"

"I shall be awful sorry to have you leave me, Geoff."

"Leave you?"

"Well, you heard what he said?"

"Yes, I heard."

"An' you know what he meant?"

"I can guess."

"You 'd best skin out o' Mulligan's first thing to-morrow."

"What for?"

"Bud says you must, an' he 'll make you, worse luck!"

"Oh, how?"

"Well," said Spike in low, troubled tones, "he 'll sic d' gang on to you if you don't make your getaway while you can —"

"By God!" exclaimed Ravenslee, his eyes suddenly very bright, "I never thought of that!"

"Yes, so I 'm thinking you 'd best skin off t'night, Geoff!" sighed the lad gloomily, whereupon Ravenslee, pocketing his pipe, clapped him joyously upon the shoulder.

"Banish that dejection, my comrade," said he, "for now, my Arthur-Spike, 'now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer in this brutal Bud' and —"

"What yer mean, Geoff?"

"I mean that life's erstwhile dull monotony is like to be forgotten quite in the vigorous, exhilarating air of Hell's Kitchen. Hell's Kitchen suits me admirably, consequently in Hell's Kitchen I 'll stay."

"Stay? Geoff, are ye crazy? What about Bud M'Ginnis?"

"M'Ginnis, my Arthur? Oh, Bud M'Ginnis may be — hush! Straighten the cloth yonder, Spike; she 's coming at last, by Heaven!"

CHAPTER XII

CONTAINING SOME DESCRIPTION OF A SUPPER PARTY

"Oh!" said Hermione, as she caught sight of Ravenslee's tall figure, "you 've come then, Mr. Geoffrey? I 've been hoping and praying you would n't! I mean —" she added hastily, in answer to his look, "I mean I have only two miserable little chops for supper."

"S' all right, Hermy!" cried Spike. "I told you not to worry about the eats. Look what 's here — stand out o' the light, Geoff, so she can see the table!"

"Why — why — what 's all this?" she exclaimed, staring at the numerous well-filled dishes with blue eyes very wide. "Oh, goodness gracious — me!" and she turned to look at Mr. Ravenslee, who, meeting that wondering glance, actually found himself stammering again.

"The fact is, Miss Hermione — er — I say the fact is we — Arthur and I — are giving a little supper to-night in honour of — of — er — my birthday."

"You bet we are, Hermy!" added Spike. "Will you pipe the turk'?"

"We have been waiting for you," continued Ravenslee, placing a chair for her, "you see — er — you are to be our guest of honour — if you will?"

"Sure you are!" nodded Spike, "and I 'm head-waiter, eater-in-chief t' the turk' while she lasts, an' chief mourner when she 's gone — so now I 'll go an' make th' tea, only don't begin without me — a fair start an' all together, see?" and he vanished into the kitchen.

"But — a whole turkey!" said Hermione, viewing it with feminine, knowledgeful eyes, "and then all this ham and tongue and — Mr. Geoffrey, how extravagant of

you!" And she shook her shapely head at him reprovingly but with a smile curving her red lips; and lo! there was the shining curl above her eyebrow again, more wantonly alluring than usual. "Whatever made you buy so much?"

"Mr. Pffeffenfifer!" answered Ravenslee, staring at the radiant curl, whereupon she, becoming aware of it, would have sent it into immediate retirement among its many fellows but that he stayed her humbly.

"Please don't!" he said.

"But it — tickles!"

"Well, let it!"

"But — why should I?"

"For — Arthur's sake."

"Arthur's!" she laughed. "Oh, Mr. Geoffrey, as if he would ever notice!"

"Well, then, for the — er — turkey's sake!"

"The turkey!" she laughed. "I 'm afraid I 'm dreadfully untidy to sit down at such a luxurious feast."

"Are you?"

"Well — am I not? Look at this poor old gown!"

"I 'm afraid I did n't notice your — er — gown."

"What did I tell you, Hermy?" said Spike, entering with the teapot. "Geoff ain't — I mean, is n't — that kind o' guy — I mean mutt — no, I mean feller. Y' see, Geoff, a girl always thinks a feller 's got his lamps — I mean eyes — on their rags — clo'es, I mean. 'S' funny, ain't it? Gee, but I 'm hungry!"

"So am I!" said Hermione.

"So am I!" said Ravenslee.

"Why, then," quoth Spike, "I 'll tell you what — let 's all sit down and eat! I guess I 'm full o' brilliant ideas t'night, but this ain't no time for talk — not with that turkey starin' us in the face, it ain't — is n't, I mean. So quit chewin' d' rag an' let 's chew d' turk' instead — an' Gee, but that 's some brilliant too, I guess!"

So down they sat, and while Hermione presided over the cups and saucers, Ravenslee carved.

"Light or dark meat, Miss Hermione?" he enquired.

"Hermy likes th' light, but a drumstick for mine — an' please don't forget th' stuffin', Geoff!"

"Tea, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"Thanks!" he answered, pausing to watch the curve of her shapely neck as she bent to pour the tea, and to note how her white hand grasped the battered teapot, little finger delicately poised.

"Say, Geoff — get busy!" said Spike wistfully. "I know the teapot 's a bit off on looks, but I broke the best one and — "

"I did n't even notice the teapot, Spike," said Ravenslee, meeting Hermione's quick, upward glance.

"Oh, cheese it, Geoff, here you 've sat with your fork in th' turk' an' your knife in th' air, starin' at that teapot a whole minute."

"No, Spike, no! I was only thinking that tea never tastes quite right unless poured out by a woman's hand — and the fairer the hand the better the tea!"

"Which means — just what, Mr. Geoffrey?" laughed Hermione.

"Why, that Spike and I are about to drink the most delicious tea in the world, of course."

"I 'd rather be eatin' that turk' when you 've sawed me off a leg," sighed Spike. "I say — when you have!"

"Ah, to be sure!" said Ravenslee, turning his attention to his carving again, while Hermione bowed her golden head above the teacups.

"Gee, but she cuts tender!" quoth Spike; "that bird sure has the Indian sign on me!"

"Sugar, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"Two lumps, please."

"Milk, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"Thank you!"

"Geoff," said Spike wearily, "I cracked that milk jug last night, but you don't have to sit starin' at it that way, an' me dyin' of hunger by inches!"

"My humble apologies!" said Ravenslee, wresting his

gaze from a certain curl and fixing it upon the turkey again. "I 'm a little — er — distracted to-night, it seems."

"Oh, Gee!" said Spike in a hopeless tone, "now Hermy 's gone an' filled my cup with milk."

"Why, boy dear, so I have!" she confessed, with a rueful laugh, and her cheeks were very pink as she rectified her mistake.

"Are you distracted too, then?" demanded Spike.

"No, I — I don't think so — no, no — of course I 'm not! I — I was just — thinking, that 's all!"

"Not about tea, I reckon! Say, what 's gettin' you two, anyway?"

"Arthur," said she serenely, as she passed his tea, "please fetch some more hot water."

Spike sighed, rose, and taking the jug, went upon his mission.

"And how do you like Mulligan's, Mr. Geoffrey?" enquired Hermione, regarding him with her calm, level eyes.

"Very much," he answered, "I like it better and better. I think — no, I 'm sure I would rather be in Mulligan's than anywhere else in the world."

"Oh! Why?"

Down went carving knife and fork, and leaning toward her he answered: "Because in Mulligan's, among many other wonders, I have found something more beautiful and far more wonderful than I ever dreamed of finding."

"In Mulligan's?" she asked, looking her amazement.

"In Mulligan's," he answered gravely. Now here, all at once, her glance wavered and sank before his.

"What do you mean?" she enquired, staring into her cup.

"Shall I tell you?"

"Yes — no!" she murmured hastily and a little breathlessly, as Spike reëntered, and paused, jug in hand, to stare.

"What — have n't you served Hermy — yet?" he enquired in an injured tone.

"Certainly I have," answered Ravenslee, "here it is, you see — all ready!"

"Only you forgot t' hand it t' her, and she forgot t' take it. Well, say — for hungry folks you two are the limit!"

"'Man doth not live by bread alone,' boy; we were talking," said Ravenslee, handing Hermione her plate.

"You said you liked milk and sugar, did n't you, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"Holy Gee!" murmured Spike.

"Milk and sugar, thank you," said Ravenslee, heedful of her deepened colour.

"Geoff," enquired Spike gently, "if I was to hang on to that drumstick, d' ye suppose you might be able to hack it off for me — some day?"

"My Arthur," said Ravenslee, plying knife and fork energetically, "'t is done — behold it!"

"But surely," said Hermione, glancing up suddenly, "surely you don't — like Mulligan's, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"Like it, Miss Hermione? I — abominate it!"

"Oh!"

"Say, Geoff," mourned Spike, "don't I get any stuffin' after all?"

"Mr. Geoffrey, I 've been wondering how you and Arthur met — and where, and — "

"Gee, Hermy!" Spike exclaimed, "you sure do talk! If you go on asking poor old Geoff s' many questions, he 'll forget t' serve himself this week. Look at his plate!"

"Why, Mr. Geoffrey, do serve yourself, please, and — oh, my gracious! I 've forgotten to give you your tea; I 'm so sorry!"

Here Spike, having once again staved off the inevitable explanation, grew hilarious, and they laughed and talked the while they ate and drank with youthful, healthy appetites. And what a supper that was! What tongue could tell the gaiety and utter content that possessed them all three? What pen describe all Hermione's glow-

ing beauty, or how her blue eyes, meeting eyes of grey would, for no perceptible reason, grow sweetly troubled, waver in their glance, and veil themselves beneath sudden, down-drooping lashes? What mere words could ever describe all the subtle, elusive witchery of her?

And Spike — ate, of course, in a blissful silence for the most part and whole-heartedly, his attention centred exclusively upon his plate; thus how should he know or care how often, across that diminished turkey, grey eyes looked into blue? As for Ravenslee, he ate and drank he knew and cared not what, content to sit and watch her when he might — the delicious curves of white neck and full, round throat, the easy grace of movement that spoke her vigorous youth; joying in the soft murmurs of her voice, the low, sweet ring of her laughter, and thrilling responsive to her warm young womanhood.

"But Mr. Geoffrey," she enquired suddenly, "if you hate Mulligan's as much as I do, whatever made you choose to live here?"

"A thrice blessed fate," he answered, "I came because — er — "

"You were a poor, lonely guy," added Spike hastily.

"Precisely, Spike! Compared to my sordid poverty Lazarus was rich, and as for the loneliness of my existence the — er — abomination of desolation was a flowery garden!"

"And how did you happen to meet Ar — "

A plate crashed to pieces on the floor, and turning, she beheld Spike very red and rueful of visage.

"'Fraid I 've bent a plate, Hermy," he explained, and winking desperately at Ravenslee, he stooped to gather up the fragments.

"Oh, Arthur, and we have so few — "

"Yes, I know — but it 's only the old cracked one, Hermy."

"You 've broken an awful lot of things lately, boy dear," she sighed. "Never mind — get on with your supper, dear."

"Oh, I 'm all right, but what about you? Gee, Hermy, you sure do talk!"

"Do I, dear?"

"Well, I guess! You keep on at poor old Geoff so he don't get a chance for a real proper chew."

"But then you see," said Ravenslee, "I would much rather talk than eat — sometimes."

"But say, Geoff — "

"Miss Hermione, you were asking how I met — "

"Hey, Geoff!" said Spike hoarsely.

"How I met your brother," continued Ravenslee, silencing the boy with a look. "Miss Hermione, I 'll tell you full and freely." Here Spike took a gulp of tea and choked, also his brow grew clammy, and he stared with dilating eyes at Ravenslee, who began forthwith:

"Once upon a time, Miss Hermione, that is to say upon a certain dark night, a man sat alone, physically and mentally alone, and very wretched because his life was empty of all achievement — because, having been blessed with many opportunities, he had never done anything worth while. And as he sat there, looking back through the wasted years, this miserable fool was considering, in his wretched folly, the cowardly sin of self-destruction, because he was sick of the world and all things in it — especially of his own useless self! But I hope I don't — er — bore you, do I?"

"No," she answered a little breathlessly, gazing at him with eyes deep and tender; "go on — please go on!"

"Well," continued Ravenslee gravely, "Destiny, or Heaven, or the Almighty, taking pity on this sorry fool, sent to him an angel in the shape of — your brother."

"Of — Arthur?" she exclaimed, while Spike's rigid attitude relaxed, and he drew a sudden, deep breath.

"Of Arthur!" nodded Ravenslee. "And Arthur lifted him out of the Slough of Despond and taught him that life might be a useful thing after all, if he could but find some object to help him — one who might inspire him to nobler things. And so he came here, hoping to find this object."

"An object?" she enquired softly.

"The Definite Object!" he answered, "with capital letters. One who might make life truly worth while. One who, teaching him to forget himself, should lift him to better things. An object to live for, work for, and if necessary to — die for!"

Here Spike, finding himself utterly forgotten again, sighed in deep and audible relief, and taking up knife and fork, fell to with renewed appetite, while Hermione, chin rested on folded hands, gazed into Ravenslee's grave face.

"Do you think he will ever — find his Object?"

"Oh, yes!"

"You seem very — confident."

"I am! You see, she 's found."

"She?" exclaimed Hermione, her eyes beginning to waver.

"With a capital S," said he, leaning nearer. "The Woman! And it 's right here that his difficulties begin, because in the first place he is so humble and she is so proud and — "

"Proud?" said she, glancing up swiftly.

"And so very beautiful!" he continued.

"Oh!" said she, and this time she did not look at him.

"Say," quoth Spike, "I think I could go another drumstick, Geoff."

"And in the second place, he is so unworthy and she so — "

"An' a bit more stuffin', Geoff," sighed Spike.

"Can she — help him?" enquired Hermione, stirring her tea absently.

"She is the only one who can — help me."

"Oh!" said Hermione again, very softly this time, stirring a little faster; and, conscious of his glance, flushed deliciously and was silent awhile. As for Spike, he glanced from one rapt face to the other and — unostentatiously helped himself to more turkey.

"But," said Hermione at last, "how can — she help?"

"By constant association," answered Ravenslee, "by

affording me the daily example of her sweet self-forgetfulness and blameless life."

"Are you sure she is so — very good?"

"I am sure she is braver and nobler than any woman I have ever known!"

Once more Spike glanced from the flushed beauty of his sister's half-averted face to Ravenslee's shining eyes, and boldly helped himself to more seasoning.

"Have you known her very long, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"Long enough to know she is — the only woman!"

"Say, Geoff," sighed Spike, "I guess old Pffeff. was right about this bird; she kind o' melts — 'n' say — she 's meltin' fast! If you two don't stop chewin' d' rag an' get busy you 'll be too late for this bird, because this bird is sure a bird of passage and — Holy Gee!" he broke off, as a knock sounded on the outer door, "who 's this, I wonder?"

Before he could rise, Hermione had vanished into the passage.

"Say, Geoff," he whispered, "how if it 's Bud?"

Ravenslee frowned and pushed back his chair, but in that moment they heard Hermione's glad welcome: "Why, Ann, you dear thing, you 're just in time for the turkey — come right in."

"Turkey, my dear!" spoke the harsh voice of Mrs. Trapes. "Turkey — land sakes! But I only jest stepped over t' ask if you 'd happened to find that lodger o' mine anywheres — why, Lord bless me!" she broke off, halting in the doorway as she beheld Ravenslee. "Lordy Lord, if he ain't a-settin' there, cool as ever was! If he ain't a-eatin' an' drinkin' an' me cookin' him at this moment the loveliest mutton chop you ever see! A mutton chop wiv a kidney, as he ordered most express — Lord, Mr. Geoffrey!"

"Why, to be sure," said Ravenslee, rising. "I forgot all about that chop, Mrs. Trapes."

"Did n't you order it most express — cut thick — an' wiv a kidney?"

"I did," said Ravenslee penitently.

"Well — there it is, cooked to a turn, an' nobody t' eat it! An' kidneys is rose again — kidneys is always risin'. Lord, Mr. Geoffrey!"

"Why, you see, Mrs. Trapes, we — that is, I had a birthday not long ago, and we 're celebrating."

"And so shall you, Ann," said Hermione, "sit down, dear!"

"An' me in me oldest apron?" said Mrs. Trapes, squaring her elbows, "my dear, I could n't — an' I would n't! But, oh! Mr. Geoffrey, what about that beautiful chop? I might warm it over for your breakfast?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Then I must eat it myself, I suppose, though it do seem a shame to waste such a lovely chop on Ann Angelina Trapes! But, Hermy dear, I just been down to see Mrs. Bowker, an' her little Hazel 's very bad — her poor little hip again, an' she 's coughin' too, somethin' dreadful."

"Poor little Hazel! Did she ask for me, Ann?"

"Well, my dear, she did, an' Mrs. Bowker did ask if you 'd go an' look at her — but I do hate t' disturb ye, that I do!"

"Oh, it 's all right, Ann. Tell Mrs. Bowker I 'll be right down."

"I will so, but it 's a dratted shame as you should shoulder everybody's troubles, that it is."

"Oh, Ann — as though I do! And then how about yourself, dear — what of the Baxters and the Ryders, and Mrs. Tipping's baby and — "

"My land!" cried Mrs. Trapes, "that chop 'll be a cinder!" and she hurried away.

"Poor little Hazel," said Hermione, coming to a small corner cupboard. "She 's such a dear, quaint little person! You must have seen her on the stairs, Mr. Geoffrey."

"I see so many on the stairs, Miss Hermione, and they are always small and generally quaint."

"Hazel 's got a game leg, Geoff," said Spike, "an' she hops around on a little crutch. She told me yesterday

she thought you was — I mean were — a fairy prince, because you always bow an' tip your lid to her when she says 'good morning.' So now she waits for you every morning, Geoff — says it makes her feel like she was a real fairy princess in a story-book. Sounds kind o' batty to me, though."

Hermione was standing on tiptoe endeavouring to reach a certain bottle upon the top shelf where were ranged many others of various shapes and sizes, when Ravenslee's big hand did it for her; but when she would have taken it, he shook his head.

"I should like to go with you, if I may," he said, "to be — er — formally introduced to the princess."

"But —" began Hermione, hesitating.

"Also I could carry the bottle for you."

"Why, if you will do all that —" she smiled.

"Thanks!" he answered, and putting the bottle in his pocket, he opened the door.

"Hey, Geoff," Spike called after him, "you 've forgot to kiss the turkey good-by!"

"Why then, you can do it for me, Spike!" he answered, and followed Hermione out upon the landing.

Side by side they descended the stair, in the doing of which her soft shoulder met him once, and once he thrilled to feel her hand touch his in the shadow, but this hand was hastily withdrawn; also, though the light was dim, he saw that she was frowning and biting her red underlip.

"These stairs are rather — narrow, are n't they?" said she, drawing to the wall.

"Delightfully!" he answered, drawing to the rail; and so they went down very silently with the width of the stairs between them.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEREIN MAY BE FOUND SOME PARTICULARS OF THE BEAUTIFUL CITY OF PERHAPS

Mrs. Bowker was a small woman, worn and faded like her carpets and curtains and the dress she wore, but, like them, she was very clean and neat.

"'T is real good of you to come, Miss Hermy," said this small, faded woman, and Ravenslee thought her very voice sounded faded, so repressed and dismally soft was it. "I would n't have had the face t' send for you, Miss Hermy, only Hazel calls an' calls, like she 's doin' now — listen!"

And sure enough from somewhere near by a small voice reached them, pitifully faint and thin: "Hermy dear, come t' me — oh, Hermy dear!"

"She allus lays an' calls like that lately when her poor hip 's worse 'n usual," sighed Mrs. Bowker. "And your gentleman friend — would he like t' see her too?"

"Thank you, I should," answered Ravenslee in his soft, pleasant voice.

"Oh, Mrs. Bowker, this is Mr. Geoffrey," said Hermione a trifle hurriedly, "he came with me to — to —"

"Be presented to the princess, if she will honour me," he added.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Bowker, looking up at him with a faded smile, "Hazel told me you had a pretty voice, sir, an' I guess I know what she meant. She sets out on the stairs when she 's well enough an' has often seen ye."

"Hermy, dear, come t' me — oh, Hermy dear!" called the little voice.

"Yes, go in, my dear, you know y' way, I guess,"

sighed Mrs. Bowker, passing a small, worn hand across her faded eyes. "There 's five dozen more collar-bands I must stitch an' buttonhole t'night — so go your ways, my dear." So saying, Mrs. Bowker went back to her labour, which was very hard labour indeed, while Hermione led the way into a tiny room, where, on a small, neat truckle-bed covered by a faded quilt, a small, pale child lay fading fast. But at sight of her visitors, two big, brown eyes grew bigger yet, and her pale, thin little cheeks flushed eagerly.

"Oh, Hermy dear!" she cried, clasping frail hands, "oh, Hermy, you 've brought him — you 've brought me our fairy prince at last!"

Now what was there in these childish words to cause Hermione's eyes to droop so suddenly as she took the bottle from Ravenslee's hand, or her rounded cheek to flush so painfully as she stooped to meet the child's eager kiss, or, when she turned away to measure a dose of the medicine, to be such an unconscionable time over it? Observing all of which, Ravenslee forthwith saluted the small invalid with a grave bow, battered hat gracefully flourished.

"It is truly an honour to meet you, princess!" said he, and lifting the child's frail little hand, he touched it to his lips. Thereafter, obeying the mute appeal of that hand, he seated himself upon the narrow bed, while Hermione, soft-voiced and tender, bent above the invalid, who, having obediently swallowed her medicine, leaned back on her pillow and smiled from one to the other.

"And now," said she, drawing Hermione down at her other side and snuggling between, "now please let 's all tell some more fairy tale; an' please, you begin, Hermy, just where you had t' leave off last time."

"Why, I — I 'm afraid I 've forgotten, dear," said Hermione, bending to smooth the child's pillow.

"Forgotten — oh, Hermy! But I 'member quite well; you got where poor Princess Nobody was climbing the mountain very tired an' sad an' carrying her heavy pack,

an' all at once — along came the Prince an' took her heavy bundle an' said he 'd love to carry it for her always if she 'd let him. An' poor Nobody knew he was the real Prince at last — the Prince she 'd dreamed of an' waited for all her life, 'cos he 'd got grey eyes so brave an' true — an' he was so big an' strong an' noble. So he helped her to the top of the mountain, an' then she thought at last she could see the beautiful City of Perhaps. That 's where you got to — don't you 'member, Hermy dear? "

Now why should Hermione's shapely head have drooped and drooped until at last her face was hidden on the pillow? And why should Geoffrey Ravenslee reach to touch the child's hair with hand so light and tender?

" The beautiful City of Perhaps," said he gently, " why, Princess, where did you learn about that? "

" From dear Princess Nobody, oh, Prince! "

" And who is she? "

" Why, she 's Hermy, Prince — and I 'm Princess Somebody. And oh, Hermy dear, you do 'member where you left off now, don't you? "

" Yes, I remember; but I — don't feel like telling fairy stories now, dear."

" Oh! are y' sick? " cried the child anxiously, touching Hermione's golden hair with loving fingers, " is it a headache like my mumsey gets? "

" N-no, dear, only I — I don't feel like telling any more of our story — to-night — somehow, dear."

" Princess," said Ravenslee, " do you know much about the wonderful City of Perhaps? "

" Oh, yes — an' I dream about it sometimes, Prince — such beautiful dreams! "

" Why, of course," nodded Ravenslee, " because it is the most beautiful City that ever happened, I guess! "

" Oh, it is! " cried the child, " shall I tell you? "

" Please do, Princess."

" Well, it 's all made of crystal an' gold, an' every one 's happy there and never sick — oh, never! An' all the children can have ices an' cream sodas whenever they want

an' lovely doll-carriages with rubber on the wheels an' — an' everything 's just lovely. Of course every one's daddy 's got lots an' heaps an' piles of money, so they never get behind with the rent an' never have to set up all night stitching an' stitching like mumsey an' Hermy have to sometimes. An' I 'm Princess Somebody, an' Hermy 's Princess Nobody, an' we 're on our ways through the valley of gloom, trying to find the beautiful City of Perhaps — but oh, it 's awful hard to find!" she ended, with a weary little sigh.

"And yet, Princess, I 'm sure we shall find it."

"We? Oh, are you coming too, Prince?" cried the child joyfully.

"To be sure I am!" nodded Ravenslee.

"Oh, goody, I 'm glad — so glad, 'cause I know we shall find it now!"

"Why?"

"Well," answered the child, looking at him with her big, wistful eyes, "'cause you look like you could find it, somehow. You see, Prince, you 've got grey eyes so brave an' true — an' you 're big an' strong an' could carry me an' Hermy over the thorny places when we get very, very tired — could n't you?"

"I could!" answered Ravenslee almost grimly, "and I — surely will!"

"When we get there, Prince, I want first — a doll-carriage an' a doll with lovely blue eyes that wink at you, an' a big box of candy, an' a new dress for my mumsey, an' no more work, an' I want lots an' lots of flowers for my daddy 'cause he loves flowers — oh, an' I want my leg t' be made well. What d' you want, Hermy?"

"Well, dear, I want to — say good-by to my sewing-machine for ever and ever and ever!"

"Why, Hermy!" exclaimed the child, "last time you said you wanted some one who could give you your heart's desire!"

"Perhaps that is my heart's desire, little Hazel," said Hermione, rising and taking up the medicine bottle.

"An' what do you want, Prince?"

"I want a great deal," answered Ravenslee, smiling down into the big, soft eyes. "I want some one who — is my heart's desire now and for ever and ever. Good night, dear little Princess!"

"You 'll come again, Prince?" she pleaded, holding up her face to be kissed, "you 'll come again soon?"

"As soon as — Princess Nobody will bring me."

"Good night, Hermy dear; you 'll bring our Prince again soon?"

"If you wish, dear," said Hermione, stooping to kiss her in turn.

"Why, Hermy — what makes your cheeks so hot to-night?"

"Are they?" said Hermione, making pretence to test them with the back of her hand.

"Why, yes," nodded the child, "an' they look so red an' — "

"Of course you believe in fairies, don't you, Princess?" enquired Ravenslee rather hurriedly.

"Oh, yes, Prince, I often see them in my dreams. They just wait till I 'm asleep, an' then they come an' show themselves. Do you ever see any?"

"Well, your highness, I fancy I have lately, and when fairies are around, things are sure to happen; wishes get the habit of coming true. So, little Princess, just go on wishing and dreaming and — watch out!"

Then Ravenslee turned and followed Hermione out upon the dingy landing; but as he climbed the stair, there went with him the memory of a little face, very thin and pale, but radiant and all aglow with rapturous hope. Silently as they had come they mounted the stairs, until, reaching the topmost landing, they paused as by mutual consent.

"Poor little Hazel!" said Hermione very gently, "if only there were real fairies to spirit her away to where the air is sweet and pure and flowers grow for little hands to gather — the doctor told me it was her only chance."

"Why, then of course she must have her chance!" said Ravenslee with a sleepy nod.

"But, Mr. Geoffrey — how?"

"Well — er — the fairies — you said something about fairies spiriting — "

"The fairies!" said Hermione a little bitterly, "I guess they are too busy over their own affairs to trouble about a poor, little, sick child; besides, what fairy could possibly live five minutes in — Mulligan's?"

"Which leaves us," said Ravenslee thoughtfully, "which leaves us the beautiful City of Perhaps. It is a wonderful thought, that!"

"But only a thought!" she sighed.

"Is it? Are you quite sure?"

"Well, is n't it?" she questioned wistfully.

"No!" he answered gravely, "the City of Perhaps is very, very real."

"What do you mean?"

Once again their hands touched in the shadow, but this time his fingers closed upon her hand, the hand that held the medicine bottle, drawing her nearer in the dimness of that dingy landing.

"I mean," he answered, "that for every one of us there is a City of Perhaps waiting to open its gates to our coming, and I am sure we shall reach it sooner or later, all three of us — the Princess and you and I — yes, even I, when I have done something worth while. And then, Hermione, then — nothing shall keep me from — my heart's delight — nothing, Hermione!" As he ended, she felt an arm about her in the dimness; an arm fierce and strong that gripped and swept her close — then, as suddenly, loosed her. For a breathless moment he stood with head bowed in seeming humility, then, stooping, he crushed her hand, medicine bottle and all, to lips that burned with anything but humility.

"Good night, dear Princess Nobody!" he said, and watched her turn away, nor moved until the door had closed upon her. That night he smoked many pipes, weav-

ing him fancies of the beautiful City of Perhaps, and dreamed dreams of what might be, and his eyes glowed bright and wide, and his mouth grew alternately grim and tender. And, that night, long after he lay asleep, Hermione's golden head was bowed above her work, but, more than once she stayed her humming sewing-machine to look at one white hand with eyes shy and wistful — the hand that had held the medicine bottle, of course.

CHAPTER XIV

OF A TEXT, A LETTER, AND A SONG

Ravenslee opened his eyes to find his small chamber full of a glory of sun which poured a flood of radiance across his narrow bed; it brought out the apoplectic roses on the wall paper and lent a new lustre to the dim and faded gold frame that contained a fly-blown card whereon was the legend:

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

And with his gaze upon this time-honoured text, Ravenslee smiled, and leaping out of bed proceeded to wash and shave and dress, pausing often to glance glad-eyed from his open window upon the glory of the new day. And indeed it was a morning of all-pervading beauty, insomuch that even Mulligan's, its dingy bricks and mortar mellowed by the sun, seemed less unlovely than its wont, and its many windows, catching a sunbeam here and there, winked and twinkled waggishly.

So Ravenslee washed and shaved and dressed, glancing now and then from this transfigured Mulligan's to the fly-blown text upon the wall, and once he laughed, though not very loudly to be sure, and once he hummed a song and so fell to soft whistling, all of which was very strange in Geoffrey Ravenslee.

The sun, it is true, radiates life and joy; before his beneficence gloom and depression flee away, and youth and health grow strong to achieve the impossible; even age and sickness, bathed in his splendour, may forget awhile their burdens and dream of other days. Truly sunshine is a thrice blessed thing. And yet, as Ravenslee tied the

neckerchief about his brawny throat, was it by reason of the sun alone that his grey eyes were so bright and joyous and that he whistled so soft and merrily?

Having brushed his hair and settled his vivid-hued neckerchief to his liking, he turned, and stooping over his humble bed, slipped a hand beneath the tumbled pillow and drew thence a letter; a somewhat crumpled missive, this, that he had borne about with him all the preceding day and read and reread at intervals even as he proceeded to do now, as, standing in the radiant sunbeams, he unfolded a sheet of very ordinary note paper and slowly scanned these lines written in a bold, flowing hand:

DEAR MR. GEOFFREY,

I find I must be away from home all this week; will you please watch over my dear boy for me? Then I shall work with a glad heart. Am I wrong in asking this of you, I wonder? Anyway, I am

Your grateful

HERMIONE C.

P.S. I hear you are a peanut man. You!!

Truly the sun is a thrice-blessed thing — and yet — ! Having read this over with the greatest attention, taking preposterous heed to every dot and comma, having carefully refolded it, slipped it into the envelope and hidden it upon his person, he raised his eyes to the spotted text upon the wall.

"You 're right," quoth he, nodding, "an altogether wise precept and one I have had by heart ever since she blessed my sight. I must introduce you to her at the earliest — the very earliest opportunity."

Then he fell to whistling softly again, and opening the door, stepped out into the bright little sitting room. Early though it was, Mrs. Trapes was already astir in her kitchen, and since sunshine is indubitably a worker of wonders, Mrs. Trapes was singing, rather harshly to be sure, yet singing nevertheless, and this was her song:

"Said the young Obadiah to the old Obadiah,
Obadiah, Obadiah, I am dry.
Said the old Obadiah to the young Obadiah,
Obadiah, Obadiah, so am I.
Said the young —"

The song ended abruptly as, opening the door, she beheld her lodger.

"Lordy Lord, Mr. Geoffrey," she exclaimed a little reproachfully, "whatever are you a-doin' of, up an' dressed an' not half-past five yet?"

"Enjoying the morning, Mrs. Trapes, and yearning for my breakfast."

"Ah, that 's just like a man; they 're almighty good yearners till they get what they yearns for — then they yearns for somethin' else — immediate!"

"Well, but I suppose women yearn too, sometimes, don't they?"

"Not they; women can only hope an' sigh an' languish an' break their 'earts in silence, poor dears."

"What for?"

"Would a couple o' fresh eggs an' a lovely ham rasher soot ye?" enquired Mrs. Trapes.

"They will suit."

"Then I 'll go and fry 'em!"

"And I 'll come and look on, if I may," said he, and followed her into her neat kitchen.

"And how," said Mrs. Trapes, as she prepared to make the coffee, "how 's the peanut trade, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"Flourishing, thanks."

"The idea of you a-sellin' peanuts!"

"Well, I 've only been guilty of it four days so far, Mrs. Trapes."

"Anyway, you 've disgusted Hermy!"

"Ah, so you told her, did you?"

"O' course I did!"

"And what did she say?"

"Laughed at first."

"She has a beautiful laugh!" said Ravenslee musingly.

"An' then she got thoughtful — "

"She 's loveliest when she 's thoughtful, I think," said Ravenslee.

"An' then she got mad at you an' frowned — "

"She 's very handsome when she frowns!" said Ravenslee.

"Oh, shucks!" said his landlady, slapping the ham rasher into the pan.

"And she was very angry, was she? "

"I should say so!" snorted Mrs. Trapes, "stamped her foot an' got red in the face — "

"I love to see her flush!" said Ravenslee musingly again.

"Said she wondered at you, she did! Said you was a man without any pride or ambition — an' that 's what I say too — peanuts!"

"They 're very wholesome!" he murmured.

"Sellin' peanuts ain't a man's job, no more than grinding a organ is."

"There 's money in peanuts!"

"Money!" said Mrs. Trapes, wriggling her elbow joints. "How much did you make yesterday — come? "

"Fifty cents."

"Fifty cents!" she almost screamed, "is that all? "

"No — pardon me! There were three pimply youths on Forty-second Street — they brought it up to seventy-five."

"Only seventy-five cents? But you sold out your stock; Tony told me you did."

"Oh, yes, trade was very brisk yesterday."

"And you sold everything for seventy-five cents? "

"Not exactly, Mrs. Trapes. You see, the majority of customers on my beat are very — er — small, and their pecuniary capabilities necessarily somewhat — shall we say restricted? Consequently, I have adopted the — er — deferred payment system."

"Land sakes!" said Mrs. Trapes, staring, "d' ye mean ter say — "

"That my method of business is strictly — credit."

"Now look-a-here, Mr. Geoffrey, I 'm talkin' serious an' don't want none o' your jokes or jollying."

"Solemn as an owl, Mrs. Trapes!"

"Well, then, how d' you suppose you can keep a wife and children, maybe, by selling peanuts that way or any way?"

"Oh, when I marry I shall probably turn my — attention to — er — other things, Mrs. Trapes."

"What things?"

"Well — to my wife, in the first place."

"Oh, Mr. Geoffrey, you make me tired!"

"Alas, Mrs. Trapes, I frequently grow tired of myself."

Mrs. Trapes turned away to give her attention to the ham.

"Did ye see that b'y Arthur yesterday?" she enquired presently over her shoulder.

"Yes."

"How 's he like his noo job?"

"Well, I can't say that he seems — er — fired with a passion for it."

"Office work, ain't it?"

"I believe it is."

"Well, you mark my words, that b'y won't keep it a week."

"Oh, I don't know," said Ravenslee, "he seemed quite content."

"You took him to the theayter las' night, did n't you? Wastin' your good money, eh?"

"Not very much, Mrs. Trapes," said her lodger humbly.

Mrs. Trapes sniffed. "Anyway, it' s a good thing you had him safe out o' the way, as it happens."

"Why?"

"Because that loafer M'Ginnis was hanging around for him all the evenin'. Even had the dratted imperence to come in here an' ask me where he was."

"And what did you tell him?"

"Tell him?" she repeated. "What did I not tell him!"

Her voice was gentle, but what words could convey all the quivering ferocity of her elbows! "Mr. Geoffrey, I told Bud M'Ginnis just exactly what kind o' a beast Bud M'Ginnis is. I told Bud M'Ginnis where Bud M'Ginnis come from an' where Bud M'Ginnis would go to. I told Bud M'Ginnis the character of his mother an' father, very plain an' p'inted."

"And what did he say?"

"He say! Mr. Geoffrey, I did n't give him a chance to utter a single word, of course. An' when I 'd said all there was to say, I picked up my heaviest flatiron, as happened to be handy, an' ordered him out; and Mr. Geoffrey, Bud M'Ginnis — went!"

"Under the circumstances," said Ravenslee, "I 'm not surprised that he did."

"Ah, but he 'll come back again, Mr. Geoffrey; he 'll find Arthur alone next time, an' Arthur 'll go along with him, and then — good night! The b'y 'll get drunk an' lose his job like he did last time."

"Why, then, he must n't find Arthur alone."

"And who 's t' stop him?"

"I."

"Mr. Geoffrey, you 're big an' strong, but M'Ginnis is stronger — and yet — " Mrs. Trapes ran a speculative eye over Ravenslee's lounging form. "H'm!" said she musingly, "but even if you did happen to lick him, what about th' gang?"

"Echo, Mrs. Trapes, promptly answers, 'what'?"

"Well, Mr. Geoffrey, I can tell ye there 's been more 'n one poor feller killed around here to my knowing — yes, sir!"

"But the police?"

"Perlice!" snorted Mrs. Trapes. "M'Ginnis an' his father have a big pull with Tammany, an' Tammany is the perlice. Anyways, Mr. Geoffrey, don't you go having no trouble with Bud M'Ginnis; leave him to some one as is as much a brute-beast as he is."

"But then — what of Spike?"

"Oh, drat him! If Arthur ain't got the horse sense to know who 's his worst enemy, he ain't worth a clean man riskin' his life over — for it would be your life you 'd risk, Mr. Geoffrey — mark my words!"

"Mrs. Trapes, your anxiety on my account flatters me, also I 'm glad to know you think me a clean man. But all men must take risks — some for money, some for honour, and some for the pure love of it. Personally, I rather like a little risk — just a suspicion, if it 's for something worth while."

"Mr. Geoffrey, what are you gettin' at?"

"Well, I would remind you that Spike has — a sister!"

"Ah!" said Mrs. Trapes, and her lined face took on a sudden anxious expression.

"Therefore, I 've been contemplating — er — tackling Mr. M'Ginnis — at a proper and auspicious time, of course."

"An' what o' the gang?"

"Oh, drat the gang, Mrs. Trapes."

"But you don't mean as you 'd fight M'Ginnis?"

"Well — er — the thought has occurred to me, Mrs. Trapes, though I 'm quite undecided on the matter, and — er — I believe my breakfast is burning!"

"My land!" ejaculated Mrs. Trapes, turning to snatch the pan from the stove, "I 'm afraid the fire 's ketched it a bit, Mr. Geoffrey — "

"No matter."

"An' now there 's the coffee b'ilin' over!"

"Let me help you," said Ravenslee, rising.

"Anyway, your breakfast 's ready, so come an' eat it while it 's good an' hot."

"On condition that you eat with me."

"What, eat wi' you, Mr. Geoffrey — in my best parlour — an' me in me workin' clo'es?"

"Ah, to be sure — not to be thought of, Mrs. Trapes; then we 'll breakfast here in the kitchen."

"Would ye mind?"

"Should love it."

So down they sat together, and Ravenslee vowed the ham was all ham should be and the eggs beyond praise. And when his hunger was somewhat appeased, Mrs. Trapes leaned her bony elbows on the table and questioned him.

"You ain't ever spoke to Hermy, have you, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"Very often, lately."

"I mean — you ain't opened your 'eart to her — matrimonially, have you?"

"No!"

"Why, then, I 'll tell you what — there 's been times when I 've been afraid that for the sake o' that b'y she 'd sacrifice herself to Bud M'Ginnis."

"No, she would never do that, Mrs. Trapes."

"Oh, but she would."

"But, you see, she could n't!"

"And why not?"

"Oh, well, because — er — I should kill him first."

"Land sakes, Mr. Geoffrey!" and Mrs. Trapes actually blenched before the glare in his eyes that was so strangely at odds with his soft, lazy tones.

"And that ends it!" he nodded. "Mrs. Trapes, I 've made up my mind!"

"What about?"

"Mr. M'Ginnis. I 'll begin to-day."

"Begin what?"

"To prepare myself to bestow on him the thrashing of his life!" So saying, Ravenslee stretched lazily and finally got up. "Good morning, Mrs. Trapes!" said he.

"But where are ye going?" she demanded.

"To my peanuts," he answered gravely. "'Man is born to labour,' you know."

"But it 's early yet."

"But I have much to do — and she laughed at me for being a peanut man, did she, Mrs. Trapes — she frowned and flushed and stamped her pretty foot at me, did she?"

"She did so, Mr. Geoffrey!"

"I 'm glad!" he answered. "Yes, I 'm very glad she

frowned and stamped her foot at me. By the way, I like that text in my bedroom."

"Text?" said Mrs. Trapes, staring.

"'Love one another,'" he nodded. "It is a very — very beautiful sentiment — sometimes. Anyway, I'm glad she frowned and stamped at me, Mrs. Trapes; you can tell her I said so if you happen to think of it when she comes home." And Ravenslee smiled, and turning away, was gone.

"Well," said Mrs. Trapes, staring at the closed door, "of all the — well, well!" Then she sighed, shook her head, and fell to washing up the breakfast things.

CHAPTER XV

WHICH INTRODUCES JOE AND THE OLD UN

THE clocks were striking nine as, according to his custom of late, Geoffrey Ravenslee trundled his barrow blithely along Thirty-eighth Street, halting now and then at the shrill, imperious summons of some small customer, or by reason of the congestion of early traffic, or to swear wholeheartedly and be sworn at by some indignant Jehu. At length he came to Eleventh Avenue and to a certain quarter where the whistle of a peanut barrow was seldom heard, and peanuts were a luxury.

And here, in a dismal, small street hard by the river, behold Ravenslee halt his gaily painted pushcart, whereat a shrill clamour arises that swells upon the air, a joyous babel; and forth from small and dismal homes, from narrow courts and the purlieus adjacent, his customers appear. They race, they gambol, they run and toddle, for these customers are very small and tender and grimy, but each small face is alight with joyous welcome, and they hail him with rapturous acclaim. Even the few tired-looking mothers, peeping from windows or glancing from doorways, smile and nod and forget awhile their weariness in the children's delight, as Ravenslee, the battered hat cocked at knowing angle, proceeds to "business." Shrill voices supplicate him, little feet patter close around him, small hands, eagerly outstretched, appeal to him. Anon rise shrieks and infantile crowings of delight as each small hand is drawn back grasping a plump paper bag — shrieks and crowings that languish and die away, one by one, since no human child may shriek properly and chew peanuts at one and the same time. And in a while, his

stock greatly diminished, Ravenslee trundles off and leaves behind him women who smile still and small boys and girls who munch in a rapturous silence.

On he went, his oven whistling soft and shrill, his long legs striding between the shafts, until, reaching a certain bleak corner, he halted again, though to be sure there were few people hereabouts and no children. But upon the opposite corner was a saloon, with a large annex and many outbuildings behind, backing upon the river, and Ravenslee, lounging on the handles of his barrow, examined this unlovely building with keen eye from beneath his hat brim, for above the swing doors appeared the words:

O'ROURKE'S SALOON

He was in the act of lighting his pipe when the doors of the saloon were swung open, and three men came out, in one of whom he recognised the tall, powerful figure and broad shoulders of Bud M'Ginnis; his companions were remarkable, but in very opposite ways, the one being slender and youthful and very smartly dressed, with a face which, despite its seeming youth, was strangely haggard and of an unhealthy pallor, while the other was plethoric, red-faced and middle-aged, a man hoarse of voice and roughly clad, and Ravenslee noticed that this fellow lacked the upper half of one ear.

"Saturday night, mind!" said M'Ginnis, loud and authoritative.

"But say, Bud," demanded the smartly dressed youth, "what 's coming to us on that last deal?"

"Nix — that 's what you get, Soapy!" The youth's pale cheek grew livid.

"So you 've got the deck stacked against us, eh, Bud?" said he.

"I got a close mouth, Soapy. I guess you don't want me t' open it very wide — now or any other old time. Saturday night, mind!" and nodding, M'Ginnis turned away. The youth looked after him with venomous eyes,

and his right hand made a sinister movement toward his hip pocket.

"Aw — quit it; are ye crazy?" grunted his companion. "Bud 's got us cinched."

"Got us — hell!" snarled the youth. "Bud 's askin' for it, an' some day he 's goin' t' get it — good!"

Toward afternoon, Ravenslee was trundling lightheartedly eastward, his barrow emptied to the last peanut. Having reached Fifth Avenue, he paused to mop his perspiring brow when a long, low automobile, powerfully engined, that was creeping along behind, pulled up with a sudden jerk, and its driver, whose immense shoulders were clad in a very smart livery, pushed up the peak of his smart cap to run his fingers through his close-cropped hair, while his mild blue eyes grew very wide and round.

"Crikey!" said he at last. "Is that you, sir, or ain't it?"

"How much?" demanded Ravenslee gruffly.

"Crumbs!" said the chauffeur. "Sir, if you — ain't you, all I say is — I ain't me!"

"Aw — what 's bitin' ye, bo?" growled Ravenslee.

"Well, if this ain't the rummest go, I 'm a perisher!"

"Say, now, crank up d' machine an' beat it while d' goin' 's good. How 's that, Joe?"

"Lord, Mr. Ravenslee — so you are my guv'nor, and blow me tight — shoving a barrer! I knowed it was you, sir; leastways I knowed your legs an' the set o' them shoulders, but — with a barrer! Excuse me, sir, but the idea o' you pushing a perishing peanut barrer so gay an' 'appy-'earted — well, all I can say is love-a-duck!"

"Well now, cut along, Joe, and get ready. I mean to put in some real hard work with you this afternoon."

"Right-o, sir!" nodded Joe eagerly. "Lord, but we 've missed you terrible — the Old Un an' me."

"Glad of it, Joe! Tell Patterson to have my bath ready when we 've finished. Off with you — drive in the Fifth Avenue entrance."

Joe nodded, and the big car turned and crept silently

away, while Ravenslee, trundling onward, turned off to the left and so into a very large, exceedingly neat garage where stood five or six automobiles of various patterns in one of which, a luxurious limousine, an old, old man snored blissfully. At the rumble of the barrow, however, this ancient being choked upon a snore, coughed, swore plaintively, and finally sat up. Perceiving Ravenslee, he blinked, rubbed his eyes, and stepping from the car very nimbly despite his years, faced the intruder with a ferocious scowl.

He was indeed a very ancient man, though very nattily dressed from spotless collar to shiny patent leather shoes, a small, dandified, bright-eyed man whose broken nose and battered features bore eloquent testimony to long and hard usage.

"'Ook it!" he croaked, with square bony jaw fiercely outthrust. "We don't want no peanuts 'ere, d' j 'ear? 'Op off, 'ook it before I break every blessed bone in yer bloomin' body!"

"What, Old Un, don't you know me, either?"

"Lumme!" exclaimed the little old man, blinking beneath hoary brows. "Ho, lor' lumme, it 's 'im! Blimy, it 's the Guv'nor — 'ow do, Guv!" and shooting immaculate cuffs over bony wrists he extended a clawlike hand.

"How are you, Old Un?"

"Well, sir, what with the rheumatix an' a stiff j'int or two an' a touch o' lumbager, not to mention all my other ailments, I ain't quite s' spry as I was!"

"But you look very well!"

"That 's where your heyes deceives you, Guv. A great sufferer I be, though patient under haffliction, ho, yus — except for a swear now an' then which do me a power o' good — yus! If I was to tell you all the woes as my poor old carkiss is hair to, you could write a book on 'em — a big 'un. I got everything the matter wi' me, I 'ave, from a thick ear an' broke nose as I took in Brummagem sixty an' five years ago to a hactive liver."

"A what?" enquired Ravenslee.

"A hactive liver. Lord, Guv, my liver gets that hactive lately as I can't set still — Joe knows, ax Joe! All as I ain't got o' human woes is toothache, not 'avin' no teeth to ache, y' see, an' them s' rotten as it 'ud make yer 'eart bleed. An' then I get took short o' breath — look at me now, dang it!"

"Why, then, sit down, Old Un," said Ravenslee, drawing up a somewhat worn armchair. "Joe and I are going at it hard and fast this afternoon, and I want you to time the rounds." And he proceeded to remove his garments.

"Oh, j'y!" cried the Old Un, hugging himself in bony arms. "Oh, j'yful words. Ah, but you peels like a good un, sir," he croaked, viewing white flesh and bulging muscle with knowing old eyes, "good an' long in the arm an' wide slope o' shoulder. You might ha' done well in the ring if you 'd been blessed wi' poverty an' I 'd 'ad the 'andling of ye — a world's unbeat champion, like Joe. A good fighter were I an' a wonnerful trainer! Ho, yus, I might ha' made a top-notcher of ye if you 'ad n't been cursed wi' money."

"I suppose," said Ravenslee thoughtfully, "I suppose Joe was one of the best all-round fighting men that ever climbed into a ring?"

"Ah — that 'e were! Joe were better 'n the best — only don't let 'im 'ear me say so, 'e 'd be that puffed up — Lord! But nobody could beat Joe — black, yaller or white; they all tried danged 'ard, but Joe were a world-beater — y' see, I trained Joe! An' to-day 'e 's as good as ever 'e was. Y' see, Joe 's allus lived clean, sir, consequent Joe 's sound, wind an' limb. Joe could go back an' beat all these fancy bruisers and stringy young champs to-day — if 'e only would — but don't let 'im 'ear me say so."

"You 're fond of Joe, Old Un?"

"An' why for not, sir — s' long as 'e don't know it? Did n't 'e look arter poor old me when 'e 'ad money, an' when 'e lost everything, did n't 'e look arter me still?

An' now 'e 's your shuvver, don' 'e keep a roof over me poor old 'ead like a son — don't 'e give me the run o' your garridge an' let me watch 'im spar wi' you an' your gentlemen friends? Ain't 'e the best an' truest-'earted man as ever drawed breath? Ah, a king o' men is Joe, in the ring an' out, sir — only never let 'im 'ear me say so — 'e 'd be that proud, Lord! there 'd be no livin' wi' 'im — sh, 'ere 'e be, sir."

Joe had laid by his chauffeur's garb and looked even bigger and grimmer in flannels and sweater.

"Ho you, Joe," cried the old man, scowling, "did ye bring me that 'bacca?"

"S'posin' I did n't?" demanded Joe.

"Then dang ye — twice!"

"An' s'posin' I did?"

"Then — give it 'ere!"

"An' that 's his gratitood, sir!" growled Joe, shaking his head and giving the packet into the old man's clutching fingers. "A unnat'ral old bag-o'-bones, that 's what 'e is, sir!"

"Bones!" croaked the Old Un viciously. "Bag-o'-bones am I? Yah — look at ye'self — pork, that 's what you are, all run to pork an' blubber an' fat, Joe, me pore lad — "

"Fat!" growled Joe. "Y' know I ain't fat; y' know I 'm as good a man as ever I was — look at that, you old sarpent!" And he smote himself with mighty fist — a blow to fell an ox. "Fat, am I?"

"As — lard!" nodded the old man, filling half an inch of blackened clay pipe with trembling fingers, "as a 'og — "

"Now my crumbs — " began Joe fiercely.

"You 're flabby an' soft, me pore lad," grinned the old man. "Flabby as a babby an' soft as a woman an' fat as a — "

Joe reached out very suddenly, and picking up the old man, armchair and all, shook him to and fro until he croaked for mercy.

"Lor' gorramighty!" he panted, as Joe set him down again.

"Fat, am I?" demanded Joe, scowling.

"Fat as a 'og — fat as forty bloomin' 'ogs!" cried the old man vindictively. "An' what 's more, your wind 's all gone — you could n't go five rounds wi' a good 'un!"

"Could n't I?"

"No!" shrieked the Old Un, "you 'd be 'anging on an' blowing like a grampus!"

"Should I?"

"Ah — like a grampus!"

"Right-o!" nodded Joe, turning away, "no jam for *your* tea to-night."

"Eh, what — what, would ye rob a pore old man of 'is jam, Joe — a pore afflicted old cove as is dependent on ye 'and an' fut, Joe — a pore old gaffer as you 've just shook up to that degree as 'is pore old liver is a-bobbin' about in 'is innards like a jelly. Joe, ye could n't be so 'eartless!"

"Ah, but I can!" nodded Joe. "An' if ye give me any more lip, it 'll be no sugar in ye tea — "

"No sugar!" wailed the Old Un, then clenching a trembling old fist, he shook it in Joe's scowling face. "Then dang ye — three times!" he cried. "What 's the old song say?

'Dang the man with three times three
Who in 'is 'eathen rage
Can 'arm a 'armless man like me
Who's 'ead is bowed wi' age!'

An' there 's for ye. Now listen again:

'Some men is this an' some is that,
But 'ere 's a truth I know:
A fightin' cove who 's run to fat
Is bound t' puff an' blow!'

An' there 's for ye again!"

Saying which, the Old Un nodded ferociously and proceeded to light his fragmentary pipe. During this col-

loquy Ravenslee had laid by his shabby clothes and now appeared clad and shod for the ring.

"Sir," said Joe, taking a set of gloves from a locker, "if you are ready to box a round or so — "

"Why, no," answered Ravenslee, "I don't want to box to-day, Joe."

"Eh?" said Joe, staring, "not?"

"I want to fight, Joe."

"To — fight, sir?" repeated Joe.

"Fight?" cried the Old Un rapturously. "Oh, music — sweet music t' me old ears! Fight? Oh, j'yful words! What 's the old song say?

> "'Appy is the first as goes
> To black a eye or punch a nose!'

"Get the mufflers on, Joe; get 'em on an' don't stand staring like a fool!"

"But, sir," said Joe, his mild eyes kindling, "d' ye mean as you want — the real thing?"

"To-day," said Ravenslee, "instead of boxing a round or two with Joe Madden, my chauffeur and mechanic, I want to see how long I can stand up to Joe Madden, undefeated champion of the world."

Joe's lean cheek flushed and he looked Ravenslee over with eyes of yearning; noted the thin flanks and slender legs that showed speed, the breadth of shoulder and long arms that spoke strength, and the deep, arched chest that showed endurance; Joe looked and sighed and shook his head.

"Sir," said he, "I honour and respect you to that degree as it would be a joy to fight such a man as you and a rare privilege t' knock you down — but, sir, if I was to knock ye down — "

"You 'd earn a five-dollar bill."

"Five dollars — for knockin' you down, sir?"

"Every time!" nodded Ravenslee.

"But Lord, sir — "

"Shut up, Joe, shut up," snarled the Old Un, hopping

out of the armchair. "Don't gape like a perishin' fish; come on up-stairs an' knock the Guv'nor down like 'e tells ye — an' 'arves on the money, mind; it was me as taught ye all you know or ever will, so 'arves on the money, Joe, 'arves on the money. Come on, Joe — d' j 'ear?"

"Crumbs!" said Joe.

"Look at 'im, Guv — look at 'im!" shrieked the old man, dancing to and fro in his impatience, "'ere 's a chance for 'im to earn a pore old cove a bit o' 'bacca money, an', what 's better still, t' show a pore old fightin' man a bit o' real sport — an' there 'e stands, staring like a perishing pork pig! Blimy, Guv, get behind an' 'elp me to shove 'im up-stairs."

"But, crikey, sir!" said Joe, "five dollars every time I —"

"Yus, yus, you bloomin' hadjective — two dollars fifty for each of us! 'Urry up, oh, 'urry up afore 'e changes 'is mind an' begins to 'edge."

So Joe follows his "Guv'nor" and the Old Un up a flight of stairs and into a large chamber fitted as a gymnasium, where are four roped and padded posts socketed into the floor; close by is a high-backed armchair in which the Old Un seats himself with an air of heavy portent.

But when Joe would have ducked under the ropes, the Old Un stayed him with an imperious gesture, and, clambering into the ring, advanced to the centre and bowed gravely as if to a countless multitude.

"Gentlemen," he piped in his shrill old voice, "I take pleasure to introduce Joe Madden, undefeated 'eavyweight champion o' the world, an' the Guv — both members of this club an' both trained by me, Jack Bowser, once lightweight champion of England an' hall the Americas. Gentlemen, it will be a fight to a finish — Markis o' Queensberry rules. Gentlemen — I thank ye." Having said which, the Old Un bowed again, gravely stepped from the ring, and ensconcing himself in the armchair, drew out a large and highly ornate watch, while Ravenslee and Joe vaulted over the ropes.

Behold them facing each other, the brown-skinned fighting man wise in ringcraft and champion of a hundred fights, and the white-fleshed athlete, each alike clean and bright of eye, light-poised of foot, quivering for swift action, while the Old Un looks heedfully from one to the other, watch in one bony hand, the other upraised.

"Get ready!" he croaked. "Go!"

Comes immediately a quick, light tread of rubber-soled feet and the flash of white arms as they circle about and about, feinting, watchful and wary. Twice Ravenslee's fist shoots out and twice is blocked by Joe's open glove, and once he ducks a vicious swing and lands a half-arm jolt that makes Joe grin and stagger, whereat the Old Un, standing upon his chair, hugs himself in an ecstasy, and forgetful of such small matters as five-dollar bills, urges, prays, beseeches, and implores the Guv to "wallop the blighter on the p'int, to stab 'im on the mark, and to jolt 'im in the kidney-pit."

"Go it, Guv!" he shrieked, "go it! In an' out again, that's it — Gorramighty, I never see sich speed. Oh, keep at 'im, Guv — make 'im cover up — sock it into 'im, Guv! Ho, lumme, what footwork — you 're as quick as lightweights — oh, 'appy, 'appy day! Go to it, both on ye!"

And "to it" they went, with jabs and jolts, hooks and swings, with cunning feints and lightning counters until the place echoed and reëchoed to the swift tramp of feet and dull thudding of blows, while the Old Un, hugging himself in long, bony arms, chuckled and choked and rocked himself to and fro in an ecstasy; moreover, when Joe, uttering a grunt, reeled back against the ropes, the Old Un must needs shriek and dance and crow with delight until, bethinking him of his duty, he checked his excitement, seated himself in the armchair again, and announced: "Time! End o' round one."

And it is to be noticed that as they sit down to take their two minutes' rest, neither Ravenslee nor Joe, for all their exertions, seem unduly distressed in their breathing.

"Sir," says Joe, looking his pupil over, "you 're uncommon quick on your pins; never knowed a quicker — did you, Old Un?"

"No, me lad — never in all me days!"

"An' you 've sure-ly got a punch, sir. Ain't 'e, Old Un?"

"Like a perishin' triphammer!" nodded the Old Un. "Likewise, sir, you 've a wonderful judgment o' distance — but, sir, you need experience!"

"That 's what I 'm after, Joe."

"And you take too many chances; you ain't larned caution yet."

"That you must teach me, Joe."

"Which I surely will, sir. In the next round, subject to no objection, I propose to knock ye down, sir."

"Which means two dollars fifty for each on us, Joe — mind that," added the Old Un.

"So fight more cautious, sir, do," pleaded Joe, "and — look out."

"Time!" croaked the Old Un. "Round two! And Guv, look out for yer p'int, cover yer mark, an' keep a heye on yer kidney-pit!"

Once again they faced each other, but this time it was Joe who circled quick and catlike, massive shoulders bowed, knees bent, craggy chin grim and firm-set, but blue eyes serene and mild as ever. A moment's silent sparring, a quick tread of feet, and Joe feints Ravenslee into an opening, swings for his chin, misses by an inch, and ducking a vicious counter, drives home a smashing body-blow and, staggering weakly, Ravenslee goes down full length.

"Shook ye up a bit, sir?" enquired Joe, running up with hands outstretched, "take a rest, now do, sir."

"No, no," answered Ravenslee, springing to his feet, "the Old Un has n't called 'Time' yet."

"Not me!" piped the old man, "not bloomin' likely! Go to it, both on ye — mind, that 's two-fifty for me, Joe!"

What need is there to tell the numerous feints, the lightning shifts, the different tricks of in-fighting and all the cunning strategy and ringcraft that Joe brought to bear and carefully explained between rounds? Suffice it that at the end of a certain fierce "mix up", as Ravenslee sat outstretched and panting, the white flesh of arms and broad chest discovered many livid marks and patches that told their tale; also one elbow was grazed and bleeding, and one knee showed signs of contact with the floor.

"Joe," said he, when his wind was somewhat recovered, "that makes it thirty dollars I owe you, I think?"

"Why, sir," said Joe, who also showed some slight signs of wear, but whose breathing was soft and regular, "why, sir, you could n't call that last one a real knockdown —"

"You 'm a liar, Joe, a liar!" cried the Old Un. "Blimy, Guv, Joe 's a-tellin' you crackers, s' help me — your 'ands touched the floor, did n't they?"

"And my knees, too," nodded Ravenslee, "also my elbow — no, that was last time or the time before."

"Well, then, tell this lying Joe-lad o' mine as 'e surely did knock ye down. Lord, Joe!" cried the Old Un, waxing pathetic, "'ow can ye go takin' money from a pore old cove like I be. Joe, I blushes for ye — an' — Time, Time there, both on ye!"

"But we don't want any more, do we, sir?" enquired Joe.

"Why, yes, I think I can go another round or so."

"There y' are, Joe, the Guv 's surely a game cove. So get at it, me lad, an' try an' knock it up to fifty dollars — 'arves, Joe, mind!"

"But, sir," began Joe, eyeing the livid blotches on Ravenslee's white skin, "don't ye think —"

"Time — oh, Time, Time!" shrieked the Old Un. Whereupon Ravenslee sprang to the centre of the ring, and once again the air resounded with tramp of feet and pant of breath. Twice Ravenslee staggers beneath Joe's mighty left, but watchful ever and having learned much, Ravenslee keeps away, biding his time — ducks a swing,

sidesteps a drive, and blocking a vicious hook — smacks home his long left to Joe's ribs, rocks him with a swinging uppercut, drives in a lightning left and right, and Joe goes down with a crash.

Even while the Old Un stared in wide-eyed, gaping amaze, Joe was on his feet again, serene and calm as ever, only his great chest laboured somewhat, but Ravenslee shook his head.

"I guess that 'll be about enough, Joe," said he.

"Guv," cried the Old Un, seizing Ravenslee's right hand, boxing glove and all, and shaking it to and fro, "you 're a credit to us, you do us bloomin' proud — strike me pink, ye do! 'Ere 's Joe 'ammered you an' 'ammered you — look at your bloomin' chest — lumme! 'Ere 's Joe been knockin' ye down an' knockin' ye down, an' you comin' up smilin' for more an' gettin' it — 'ere 's Joe been a-poundin' of ye all over the ring, yet you can finish strong an' speedy enough to put Joe down — blimy, Guv, you 're a wonder an' no error!"

"I don't think Joe fought his hardest, Old Un."

"If 'e did n't," cried the old man, "I 'll punch 'im on the nose so 'e won't never smell nothink no more."

"Sir," said Joe, "in the first round p'raps I did go a bit easylike, but arter that I came at you as 'ard an' 'eavy as I could. I 'it you where an' 'ow I could, barrin' your face."

"I hope I shall soon be good enough for you to go for my face as well, Joe."

"But, sir — if I give you a black eye — "

"How will — say, ten dollars do? "

"Ten dollars! For blacking your eye, sir? "

"Lumme, Joe!" cried the Old Un, "get back into the ring and black 'em both — "

"Shut up!" said Joe, scowling down into the Old Un's eager face, "you 'eartless old bloodsucker, you!"

"Bloodsucker!" screamed the old man, "w'ot, me? I 'll punch you on the ear-'ole, Joe, so 's you never 'ear nothin' no more."

"Are you on, Joe?" asked Ravenslee, while the Old Un, swearing softly, unlaced his gloves.

"But, crumbs, sir — axin' your pardon, things 'll come a bit expensive, won't they? Y' see — "

"So much the better, ye blighted perisher!" snarled the Old Un, "an' don't forget as the Guv owes you thirty dollars a'ready — an' 'arves, mind."

"Stow it, you old bag o' wickedness — "

"Bag o' — " the Old Un let fall the boxing gloves and turning on Joe, reached up and shook a feeble old fist under the champion's massive chin. "Look at this, me lad — look at this!" he croaked. "Some day I shall ketch you sich a perishin' punch as 'll double ye up till kingdom come, me lad, and — Lord, the Guv 's countin' out our money — "

"Thirty of 'em, Joe," said Ravenslee, holding out a wad of bills.

"Why, sir," said Joe, backing away, "axing yer pardon, but I 'd rayther not — you give me such uncommon good wages, sir, and a bonus every race we run, win or lose — so, sir, I — I 'd rayther not — "

"Not?" cried the Old Un, "not take money as is 'arf mine — Oh, kick 'im, somebody — kick 'im! Pound 'im for a pigeon-'earted perishin' pork pig — "

"That 'll be no sugar in your tea t'night, old viciousness! But, sir, I 'd rayther not — "

"Don't 'eed 'im, Guv — don't 'eed the flappin' flounder. If 'e wont obleege ye in a little matter like thirty dollars, I will — I 'll always obleege you — "

"That 's enough from you, old tombstones."

"Tombstones!" hissed the Old Un, scowling darkly and squaring his trembling fists, "all right, me lad, 'ere 's where I ketch ye one as 'll flatten ye out till the day o' doom — "

Hereupon Joe caught him above the elbows, and lifting him in mighty hands that yet were gentle, seated the snarling old fellow in the armchair.

"Old Un," said he, shaking his finger, "if ye give me

any more of it — off t' bed I take ye without any tea at all!" The Old Un, cowering beneath that portentous finger, swore plaintively and promptly subsided.

"And now," said Ravenslee, thrusting the money into Joe's reluctant hand, "when I make a bargain, I generally keep it. I wish all my money had been spent to such good purpose."

"What about me?" whined the old man humbly, "don't I get none, Joe-lad?"

"Not a cent, you old rasper!"

"Blimy, Guv, you won't forget a old cove as 'ud shed 'is best blood for ye?"

"The Guv'nor don't want yer blood, old skin-and-bones. And now, come on, sir —"

"Stay a minute, Joe, the Old Un generally keeps time for us when we spar rounds."

"That I do, Guv," cried the old man, "an' give ye advice worth its weight in solid gold; you owe me a lot, s' 'elp me."

"About how much?"

"Well, Guv, I ain't got me ledger-book 'andy, but roughly speakin' I should say about five or six 'undred dollars. But seein' you 's you an' I 'm me — a old man true-'earted as never crossed nobody — let 's say — fifteen dollars."

"Why, you old — thievin' — vagabone!" gasped Joe, as Ravenslee gravely handed over the money.

"Vagabone yourself!" said the Old Un, counting the bills over in trembling fingers. "The Guv wants a bath — take 'im away — 'ook it, d' j 'ear?"

"Has Patterson got everything ready, Joe?" enquired Ravenslee, taking up his clothes.

"No, sir," mumbled Joe, "but I 'll have ye bath ready in a jiffy, sir."

"But where 's Patterson?"

"Well, 'e — 'e 's out, sir."

"And the footmen?"

"They 're out, sir."

"Oh! And the housekeeper — er — what 's her name — Mrs. Smythe?"

"Gone to call on her relations, sir."

"Ah! And the maids?"

"Mrs. Smythe give 'em leave of habsence, sir. Y' see, sir," said Joe apologetically, "you 're 'ere so seldom, sir."

"My servants are not exactly — er — worked to death, Joe?"

"No, sir."

"Manage to look after themselves quite well?"

"Yes, sir."

"It seems I need some one to look after them — and me."

"Yes, sir."

"A woman, Joe — one I can trust and honour and — er — what d' ye think?"

"I think — er — yes, sir."

"Well — what do you suggest?"

"Marry her, sir."

"Joe, that 's a great idea! Shake hands! I surely will marry her — at once — if she 'll have me."

"She 'll have you, sir."

"Do you really think she will, Joe?"

"I 'm dead certain, sir."

"Joe, shake again. I 'll speak to her when she comes home. To-morrow 's Saturday, is n't it?"

"As ever was, sir."

"Then, Joe — wish me luck; I 'll ask her — to-morrow!"

CHAPTER XVI

OF THE FIRST AND SECOND PERSONS, SINGULAR NUMBER

It was Saturday morning, and Hermione was making a pie and looking uncommonly handsome about it and altogether feminine and adorable; at least, so Ravenslee thought, as he watched her bending above the pastry board, her round, white arms bared to each dimpled elbow, and the rebellious curl wantoning at her temple as usual.

"But why kidneys, my dear?" demanded Mrs. Trapes, glancing up from the potatoes she was peeling. "Kidneys is rose again; kidneys is always risin', it seems to me. If you must have pie, why not good, plain beefsteak? It 's jest as fillin' an' cheaper, my dear — so why an' wherefore kidneys?"

"Arthur likes them, and he 'll be hungry when he comes in —"

"Hungry," snorted Mrs. Trapes, "that b'y 's been hungry ever since he drawed the breath o' life. How 's he gettin' on with his new job?"

"Oh, splendidly!" cried Hermione, flushing with sisterly pride, "they 've promised him a raise next month."

"What, already?" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes, cutting viciously into a potato. "If he don't watch out, they 'll be makin' him a partner next."

"Oh, Ann, I wish you were not quite so — so hard on him!" sighed Hermione. "Remember, he 's only a boy!"

"You were a woman at his age, earning enough t' keep ye both — but there! I don't mean t' be hard, Hermy; anyway, a man 's never much good till he 's growed up, and then only because some woman teaches him how t' be."

"What do you say to that, Mr. Geoffrey?" enquired Hermione, pausing, flour-dredger in hand, to glance at him slily under her brows.

"I think Mrs. Trapes is a wonderful woman," he answered.

"Ah, now, Mr. Geoffrey, quit y'r jollying," said Mrs. Trapes, smiling at the potato.

"Mrs. Trapes has taught me much wisdom already and, among other things, that I shall never be or do anything worth the while without the aid of a woman — "

"Lord, Mr. Geoffrey, I never remember sayin' no sich thing!"

"Not in so many words, perhaps, but you implied it, Mrs. Trapes."

"H'm!" said Mrs. Trapes dubiously.

"Consequently, I mean to ask that woman — on the very first opportunity, Miss Hermione." Seeing that Hermione was silent, all her attention being centred in the dough her white fists were kneading, Mrs. Trapes spoke instead.

"D' ye mean as you want some one t' look after you — to sew an' cook an' wash an' sew buttons on for ye — I know the sort!"

"I certainly do, and — "

"Ah, it 's a slave you want, Mr. Geoffrey, and peanut men don't have slaves — not unless they marries 'em, and a woman as would marry a peanut man has only herself t' blame — peanuts!"

Hermione laughed, reached for the rolling-pin, and immediately fell to work with it, her head stooped rather lower than was necessary. As for Ravenslee, he lounged in his chair, watching the play of those round, white arms.

"But why the kidneys, Hermy? You 've got to cut out luxuries now, my dear — we all have, I guess; it 'll be dry bread next, I reckon."

"Why so?" enquired Ravenslee lazily.

"Why?" cried Mrs. Trapes bitterly, "I 'll tell you why — because me an' Hermy an' every one else is bein'

squeezed dry t' fill the pockets of a thing as calls itself a man — a thievin' beast on two legs as is suckin' our blood, gnawin' our flesh, grindin' the life out of us — a great fat man as is treadin' us down under his great boots, down an' down to slavery — death — an' worse — it 's such men as him as keeps the flames of hell goin' — fat frizzles well, an' so will Mulligan, I hope!"

"Mulligan?" enquired Ravenslee.

"He 's raised the rents on us, Mr. Geoffrey," sighed Hermione.

"Raised the rents?" said Ravenslee, forgetting to lounge.

"Sure!" nodded Mrs. Trapes grimly. "I guess he thinks we live too easy an' luxoorious, so he 's boosted it up a dollar per. A dollar a week don't sound a whole lot, p'raps, but it sure takes some gettin'; folks expects a deal o' scrubbin' an' sewin' an' slavin' for a dollar — yes, sir."

"We shall have to work a little harder, that 's all, Ann dear."

"Harder? I guess you work hard enough for two — an' who gets the benefit? Why, Mulligan does. Oh, it 's a great comfort t' remember the flames of hell, sometimes. Lord, when I think how we have t' slave t' make enough t' live — "

"There are others worse than us, Ann."

"Why, yes, there 's poor Mrs. Finlay; she 's got to go, an' her husband paralysed! There 's little Mrs. Bowker sewed herself pretty well blind t' keep her home together — she 's got to go. There 's Mrs. Sims with all those children, and the — but there, who cares for the likes o' them — who cares, eh, Mr. Geoffrey? An' what might you be dreamin' over this time?" she enquired, eyeing Ravenslee's long figure a little contemptuously, for he had fallen to lounging again, sleepy eyes half closed.

"I was thinking what a lot of interest we might find in this busy world — if we only would take the trouble to look for it!" he answered. "The fool who complains that

his life is empty is blind and deaf and — damnably thick — er — pardon me, I — er nearly got excited."

"Excited?" snorted Mrs. Trapes, "I'd pay good money t' see you like that!"

"You see, I had an idea — a rather original idea!"

"Then take care of it, Mr. Geoffrey; nurse it careful, and we'll have ye doin' bigger things than push a peanut barrer — peanuts!"

"Mrs. Trapes, I've got a stranglehold on that idea, for it is rather brilliant."

"There's that kettle b'ilin' at last, thank goodness!" sighed Mrs. Trapes, crossing to the stove, "tea's a luxury, I suppose, but — oh, drat Mulligan, anyway!"

So Mrs. Trapes brewed the tea, while Ravenslee gazed at Hermione again, at her shapely arms, her dimpled elbows, her preoccupied face — a face so serenely, so utterly unaware of his regard, of course, until he chanced to look away, and then — Hermione stole a glance at him.

"There, my dear," said Mrs. Trapes after a while, "there's a cup o' tea as *is* a cup o' tea, brewed jest on the b'ile, in a hot pot, and drawed to perfection! Set right down an' drink it, slow an' deliberate. Tea ain't meant to be swallowed down careless, like a man does his beer! An' why?" demanded Mrs. Trapes, as they sipped the fragrant beverage, all three, "why ain't you out with your precious — peanuts, Mr. Geoffrey?"

Ravenslee set down his cup and turned to Hermione.

"Mrs. Trapes has told you, I think, that I am become — er — an itinerant vendor of the ubiquitous peanut —"

"Mr. Geoffrey!" gasped Mrs. Trapes, gulping a mouthful of hot tea and blinking, "I never did! Never in all my days would I allow myself such expressions — Mr. Geoffrey, I'm ashamed at you! An' that reminds me — it was chicken fricassee, was n't it? For your supper, I mean?"

"I believe it was."

"Then," said Mrs. Trapes, rising, "I'll go an' buy it. Was you wantin' anything fetched, Hermy?"

"If you would n't mind bringing a bunch of asparagus — "

"Sparrergrass!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes in horror-struck tones, "why, it 's anywhere from thirty to sixty cents — "

"But Arthur loves it, dear, and now that he 's working so hard — "

"Arthur likes!" cried Mrs. Trapes indignantly. "Mr. Geoffrey, it 's been Arthur ever since he was born, an' her scrinchin' an' pinchin' herself for the sake o' that b'y. O' course he likes sparrergrass — so do I — but I make shift with pertatoes or cabbidge or carrots — an' so should he. Come now, Hermy, you take a bunch o' carrots instead; carrots is healthy an' cheap! Come now, is that sparrergrass to be carrots or not?"

"Ann, that asparagus is to be — asparagus!"

"Such wicked extravagance, an' all for that b'y. Hermy, I 'm surprised at ye!"

For a long moment after Mrs. Trapes had departed there was silence, while Ravenslee sat gazing where Hermione stood busy at her pastry again.

"Mr. Geoffrey," said she at last, "I want to thank you for watching over my boy. Arthur told me how good you were to him while I was away. I want you to know how grateful I am — "

"What beautiful hands you have, Hermione — and I shall dream of your arms."

"My arms?" she repeated, staring.

"They 're so — smooth and white — "

"Oh, that 's flour!" said she, bending over the table.

"And so — round — "

"Oh, Mr. Geoffrey! Can't you find something else to talk about?"

"Why, of course," he answered, "there are your feet, so slender and shapely — "

"In these frightful old shoes!" she added.

"Worn out mostly in other peoples' service," he nodded. "God bless them!"

"They let the wet in horribly when it rains!" she sighed.

"So heaven send us dry weather! Then there is your wonderful hair," he continued, "so long and soft and — "

"And all bunched up anyhow!" said she, touching the heavy, shining braids with tentative fingers. "Please don't say any more, Mr. Geoffrey, because I just know I look a sight — I feel it! And in this old gown too — it 's the one I keep to scrub the floors in — "

"Scrub the floors?" he repeated.

"Why, of course, floors must be scrubbed, and I 've had plenty — oh, plenty of experience — now what are you thinking?"

"That a great many women might envy you that gown for the beauty that goes with it. You are very beautiful, you know, Hermione."

"And beauty in a woman is — everything, is n't it?" she said a little bitterly and with head suddenly averted.

"Have I offended you?"

"No," she answered without looking around, "only sometimes you are so very — personal."

"Because the First and Second Persons Singular Number are the most interesting persons in the world, and — Hermione, in all this big world there is only one person I want. Could you ever learn to love a peanut man?"

"That would all depend — on the peanut man," she answered softly, "and you — you don't talk or act a little bit like a real peanut man."

"Well, could you stoop to love this peanut man just as he is, with all his faults and failures, love him enough to trust yourself to his keeping, to follow him into the unknown, to help him find that Beautiful City of Perhaps — could you, Hermione?" As he ended he rose to his feet, but swiftly, dexterously, she eluded him.

"Wait!" she pleaded, facing him across the table, "I — I want to talk to you — to ask you some questions, and I want you to be serious, please."

"Solemn as sixty judges!" he nodded.

"Well, first, Mr. Geoffrey — why do you pretend to sell peanuts?"

"Pretend!" he repeated, trying to sound aggrieved.

"Oh, I 'm not blind, Mr. Geoffrey."

"No, indeed — I think your eyes are the most beau — "

"Oh, please, please be serious!"

"As a dozen owls!"

"I — I know," she went on quickly, "I 'm sure you have n't always had to live in such— such places as Mulligan's. I know you don't belong here as I do. Is it necessity has driven you to live here or only — curiosity?"

"Well — er — perhaps a little of both," he admitted.

"Then you 're not obliged to sell peanuts for a living?"

"'Obliged' is scarcely the word, perhaps; let us call it a peanut penchant, a hobby, a — "

"You are not quite so — poverty-stricken as you pretend?" Her voice was very soft and gentle, but she kept her head averted, also her foot was tapping nervously in its worn shoe.

"Oh, as to money," he answered, "I have enough for my simple needs, but in every other sense I am a miserable pauper. You see, there are some things no money can buy, and they are generally the best things of life."

"And so," said she, interrupting him gently, "you come here to Mulligan's, you deceive every one into thinking you are very poor, you make a pretence of selling peanuts and push a barrow through the streets — why?"

"First, because pushing a barrow is — er — very healthy exercise."

"Yes, Mr. Geoffrey?" she said in the same soft voice.

"And second," he continued, wishing he could see her face, "second, because I find it — er, well — highly amusing."

"Amusing!" she cried, turning suddenly, her eyes very bright and her cheeks hot and anger-flushed. "Amusing!" she repeated, "ah, yes — that 's just it — it 's all only a joke to you, to be done with when it grows tiresome. But my life here — our life is very real — ah, terribly real,

and has been — sordid sometimes. What is only sport to you for a little while is deadly earnest to me; you are only playing at poverty, but I must live it — "

"And thirdly," he continued gently, "because I love you, Hermione!"

"Love me!" she repeated, shaking her head. "Ah, no, no — your world is not my world nor ever could be."

"Why, then, your world shall be mine."

"Yes, but for how long?" she demanded feverishly. "I wonder how long you could endure this world of mine? I have had to work and slave all my life, but you — look at your hands, so white and well-cared for — yours are not the hands of a worker!"

"No, I'm afraid they're not!" he admitted a little ruefully.

"Now look at mine — see my fingers all roughened by my needle."

"Such busy, capable hands!" said he, drawing a pace nearer, "hands always working for others, so strong to help the distressed. I love and honour them more just because of those work-roughened fingers." As he spoke he reached out very suddenly, and clasping those slender hands, stooped and kissed them reverently. Now, glancing up, he beheld her red lips quivering while her eyes were suffused all at once, as, drooping her head, she strove to loose his hold.

"Let me go!" she whispered, "I — I — ah, let me go!"

"Hermione," he breathed, "oh, Hermione, how beautiful you are!" But at this she cried out almost as if he had struck her and, wrenching her hands free, covered her face.

"Oh, God! — are all men the same?"

"Hermione," he stammered, "Hermione — what do you mean?"

"I mean," she answered, proud head up-flung, "there were always plenty of men to tell me that — when I was an office scrubwoman. Well?" she demanded fiercely, stung by something in his look, "what did you think I'd

been? When a girl is left alone with a baby brother to care for, she can't wait and pick and choose work that is nice and ladylike; she must take what comes along or starve — so I worked. I used to scrub floors and stairs in an office building. I was very young then, and Arthur hardly more than a baby, and it was either that or starvation or — " she flushed painfully, but her blue eyes met his regard unflinchingly; " anyway, I — preferred to be a scrubwoman. So now you know what I mean by your world not being my world, and I — I guess you see how — how impossible it all is."

For a long moment was a silence wherein she stood turned from him, her trembling fingers busily folding and refolding a pleat in her apron while he stared down blindly at the floor.

" So you preferred the slavery of scrubbing floors, did you, Hermione? " he said at last.

" Of course! " she answered, without turning or lifting her heavy head.

" And that," said he, his voice as placid, as serenely unhurried as usual, " and that is just why all things are going to be possible to us — yes, even turning my wasted years to profit. Oh, my Hermione, help me to be worthy of you — teach me what a glorious thing life may be — "

" I? " she said wonderingly, her drooping head still averted, " but I am — "

" Just the one woman I want to be my own for ever and always, more — far more than I have ever wanted anything in my life."

" But," she whispered, " I am only — "

" The best, the noblest I have ever known."

" But a — scrubwoman! "

" With dimples in her elbows, Hermione! " In one stride he was beside her, and she, because of his light tone, must turn at last to glance up at him half-fearfully; but those grey eyes were grave and reverent, the hands stretched out to her were strangely unsteady, and when he spoke again, his voice was placid no longer.

"Dear," he said, leaning toward her, "from the very first I 've been dying to have you in my arms, but now I — I dare not touch you unless you — will it so. Ah, don't — don't turn from me; let me have my answer — look up, Hermione!"

Slowly she obeyed, and beholding the shy languor of her eyes, the sweet hurry of her breathing, and all the sighing, trembling loveliness of her, he set his arms about her, drawing her close; and she, yielding to those compelling arms, gave herself to the passion of his embrace. And so he kissed her, her warm, soft-quivering mouth, her eyes, her silken hair, until she sighed and struggled in his clasp.

"My hair," she whispered, "see — it 's all coming down!"

"Well, let it — I 'd love to see it so, Hermione."

"Should you? Why then — let me go," she pleaded.

Reluctantly he loosed her, and standing well beyond his reach, she shook her shapely head, and down, down fell the heavy coils, past shoulder and waist and hip, rippling in shining splendour to her knees. Then, while he gazed spellbound by her loveliness she laughed a little unsteadily, and flushing beneath his look, turned and fled from him to the door; when he would have followed she stayed him.

"Please," she said, tender-voiced, "I want to be alone — it is all so wonderful, I want to be alone and — think."

"I may see you again to-night, Hermione? Dear — I must."

"Why, if you must," she said, "how can I — prevent you?"

Then, all at once, her cool, soft arms were about his neck, had drawn him down to meet her kiss, and — he was alone with the pastry board, the rolling-pin and the flour-dredger — but he saw them all through a golden glory, and when he somehow found himself out upon the dingy landing, the glory was all about him still.

CHAPTER XVII

HOW GEOFFREY RAVENSLEE MADE A DEAL IN REAL ESTATE

The morning sun blazed down, and Tenth Avenue was full of noise and dust and heat; children screamed and played and fought together, carts rumbled past, distant street cars clanged their bells, the sidewalks were full of the stir and bustle of Saturday; but Ravenslee went his way heedless of all this, even of the heat, for before his eyes was the vision of a maid's shy loveliness, and he thrilled anew at the memory of two warm lips. Thus he strode unheeding through the jostling throng at a speed very different from his ordinary lounging gait. Very soon he came to a small drug-store, weather-beaten and grimy of exterior but very bright within, where everything seemed in a perpetual state of glitter, from the multitudinous array of bottles and glassware upon the shelves to the taps and knobs of the soda fountain. Yet nowhere was there anything quite so bright as the shrewd, twinkling eyes of the little grey-haired man who greeted Ravenslee with a cheery nod.

"Hot enough?" he enquired.

"Quite!" answered Ravenslee.

"Goin' to be hotter."

"Afraid so."

"Rough on th' kiddies, an' ice goin' up. Which reminds me I sent on the mixture you ordered for little Hazel Bowker."

"Good," nodded Ravenslee.

"And the pills to Mrs. Sims."

"Good again."

"An' the sleeping-draught for old Martin Finlay."

"Good once more."

"Won't last long, old Martin, I guess. Never been the same since little Maggie drowned herself, poor child. What d' ye want this morning?"

"First to pay for the medicine," said Ravenslee, laying a five-dollar bill on the counter, "and then the use of your 'phone."

"Right there," said the chemist, nodding toward a certain shady corner, where, remote from all intruding bustle, was a telephone booth into which Ravenslee stepped forthwith and where ensued the following one-sided conversation:

RAVENSLEE. "Hello!"

TELEPHONE. "Buzz!"

RAVENSLEE. "Hello, Central, give me Thirty-three Wall, please."

TELEPHONE. "Ting-a-ling — buzz!"

RAVENSLEE. "Damn this 'phone — what? No, I said Double-three Wall."

TELEPHONE. "Buzz! Ting! Zut!"

RAVENSLEE. "Sounded different, did it? Well, I want — "

TELEPHONE. "Buzz! Zut! Ting!"

RAVENSLEE. "Thanks. Hello, that Thirty-three Wall? Dana and Anderson's Office? Good! I want to speak with Mr. Anderson — say Mr. Ravenslee."

TELEPHONE. "Zing!"

RAVENSLEE. "Thanks. That you, Anderson?"

TELEPHONE. "Pang!"

RAVENSLEE. "Thanks — very well! What the devil 's wrong with this instrument of torment — can you hear me?"

TELEPHONE. "Crack!"

RAVENSLEE. "Good! Yes — that 's better! Now listen; I want you to do some business for me. No, I 'm buying, not selling. I 'm going into real estate. What, a bad speculation? Well, anyway, I 'm buying tenement property in Tenth Avenue, known as Mulligan's, I be-

lieve. Oh, you 've heard of it, eh? Not in the market? Not for sale? Well, I 'll buy it. Oh, yes, you can — what d' you suppose is his figure? So much? Phew! Oh, well, double it. No, I 'm not mad, Anderson. No, nor drunk — I just happen to want Mulligan's — and I 'll have it. When can you put the deal through? Oh, nonsense, make him sell at once — get him on the 'phone. Oh, yes, he will, if you offer enough — Mulligan would sell his mother — at his own price. You quite understand — at once, mind! All right, good-by. No, I 'm not mad — nor drunk, man; I have n't tasted a cocktail for a month. Eh — go and get one? I will!"

So saying, Ravenslee hung up the receiver and hastened out of the stifling heat of the suffocating booth, mopping perspiring brow.

"You look kinder warm!" ventured the chemist.

"I feel it."

"And it 's going to be warmer. Try an ice-cream soda — healthy and invigorating."

"And better than any cocktail on such a day!"

"I guess! Take one?"

"Thank you, yes."

So the bright-eyed chemist mixed the beverage and handed it over the counter.

"Chin-chin!" he nodded.

"Twice," said Ravenslee, lifting the long glass. "To the Beautiful City of Perhaps!" and he drank deep.

"Say," said the chemist, staring, "that sounds t' me like a touch of the sun. Try a bottle of my summer mixture, good for sunstroke, heat-bumps, colic, spasms, and Hell's Kitchen generally — try a bottle?"

"Thanks," said Ravenslee, "I will." And grimly pocketing the bottled panacea, he stepped out into the hot and noisy avenue.

CHAPTER XVIII

HOW SPIKE HEARKENED TO POISONOUS SUGGESTION AND SOAPY BEGAN TO WONDER

Spike was on his way from the office, very conscious of his new straw hat and immaculate collar; his erstwhile shabby suit had been cleaned and pressed by Hermione's skilled and loving fingers, hence Spike turned now and then as he passed some shop window to observe the general effect with furtive eye; and stimulated by his unwontedly smart appearance, he whistled joyously as he betook himself homeward. Moreover in his breast pocket was his pay envelope, not very bulky to be sure, wherein lay his first week's wages, and as often as he turned to glance at the tilt of the straw hat or heed the set of his tie, his hand must needs steal to this envelope to make sure of its safety. His fingers were so employed when he chanced to espy a certain article exposed for sale in an adjacent shop window; whereupon, envelope in hand, he incontinent entered and addressed the plump Semitic merchant in his usual easy manner.

"Greetin's, Abe! I 'll take one o' them hair-combs."

"Hair-gombs?" nodded the merchant. "Vot kind?"

"What kind? Why, the best you got."

"Ve got 'em up to veefty dollars —"

"Come off it, Cain, come off — I ain't purchasin' a diamond aigrette to-day, it 's a lady's hair-comb I want — good, but not too flossy-lookin' — savvy that? This 'll do, I guess — how much? Right there!" said Spike, flicking a bill upon the counter. "That 's it, stick it in a box — oh, never mind th' wrappin's. S' long, Daniel!"

With his purchase in his pocket, Spike strode out of the

shop, whistling cheerily, but the merry notes ended very suddenly as he dodged back again, yet not quite quick enough, for a rough voice hailed him, hoarse and jovial.

"Why, hello, Kid, how goes it?" M'Ginnis's heavy hand descended on his shrinking shoulder and next moment he was out on the sidewalk where Soapy lounged, a smouldering cigarette pendent from his thin, pallid lips as usual. And Soapy's eyes, so bright between their narrowed, puffy lids, so old-seeming in the youthful oval of his pale face, were like his cigarette, in that they smouldered also.

"Holy smoke!" exclaimed M'Ginnis, surveying Spike up and down in mock amazement, "this ain't you, Kid — no, this sure ain't you. Looks all t' th' company-promoter, don't he, Soapy?"

"'S' right, Kid, 's' right!" nodded the pallid youth, his smouldering eyes always turning toward M'Ginnis.

"Say, now, Bud, quit your kiddin'!" said Spike petulantly.

"But, Gee whiz!" exclaimed M'Ginnis, tightening his grasp, "you sure are some class, Kid, in that stiff collar an' sporty tie. How 's the stock market? Are ye a bull or a bear?"

"Ah, cut it out, Bud!" cried the lad, writhing.

"Right-o, Kid, right-o!" said M'Ginnis, loosing his hold. "You 're comin' over t' O'Rourke's t'night, of course?"

"Why, no, Bud — I can't."

"Oh, t' hell wid that — I got you all fixed up to go ten rounds wid Young Alf, th' East Side Wonder — "

"What?" exclaimed Spike, his eyes bright and eager, "you got me a match wi' Young Alf? Say, Bud — you ain't stringing me, are ye?"

"Not much. I told you I 'd get ye a real chance — "

"Why," cried Spike, "if I was t' lick Young Alf, I 'd be in line t' meet th' top-notchers!"

"Sure — if you lick him!" nodded M'Ginnis grimly.

"Say," said Spike, his face radiant, "I 've just been

waitin' an' waitin' for a chance like this — a chance t' show you an' th' bunch I can handle myself, an' now " — he stopped all at once, and shaking his head gloomily, turned away. " I forgot, I — I can't, Bud."

" Aw, what 's bitin' ye? "

" I can't come t'night."

" Won't come, ye mean! "

" Can't, Bud."

" Why not? "

" I promised Hermy t' quit fightin' — "

" Is that all? Hermy don't have t' know nothin' about it. This is a swell chance for ye, Kid, the best you 'll ever get, so just skin over t'night an' don't say nothin' t' nobody."

" I — can't, Bud — that 's sure."

" Goin' t' give me d' throw-down, are ye? "

" I don't mean it that ways, Bud, but I can't break my promise t' Hermy — "

" She 'd never know."

" She 'd find out some ways; she always does, and I can't lie t' her."

" So you won't come, hey? We ain't classy enough for ye these days, hey? I guess goin' to an office every day is one thing an' crackin' a millionaire's crib 's another."

" Cheese it, Bud, cheese it! " gasped Spike, pale and trembling.

" Right-o, Kid! " nodded M'Ginnis, " but I 've been wantin' t' know how ye made your get-away that night."

" Oh, quit — quit talkin' of it! " Spike panted. " I — I want t' forget all about it. I been tryin' t' think it never happened."

" Ah, but you know it did," said M'Ginnis, " an' I know it, an' Soapy knows it did — don't yer, Soapy? "

" 'S' right! " nodded Soapy, his voice soft, his eyes hard and malevolent.

" So we kinder want t' know," continued M'Ginnis, heedless always of those baleful watching eyes, " we just want t' get on t' how you — "

"Oh, say — give it a rest!" cried Spike desperately. "Give it a rest, can't ye?"

"Why, then, Kid, what about comin' over t' O'Rourke's t'night?"

Spike wrung his hands. "If Hermy finds out, she 'll — cry, I guess — "

"Hermy!" growled M'Ginnis, black brows fierce and scowling, "a hell of a lot you care for Hermy, I — don't think!"

"Say now, you Bud, whatcher mean?" demanded Spike, quivering with sudden anger.

"Just this, Kid — what kind of a brother are ye t' go lettin' that noo pal o' yours — that guy you call Geoff — go sneaking round her morning, noon, an' night?"

"You cut that out, Bud M'Ginnis. Geoff don't! Geoff ain't that kind."

"He don't, eh? Well, what about all this talk that 's goin' on — about him an' her, an' her an' him — eh?"

"What talk?" demanded Spike, suddenly troubled.

"Why, every one 's beginnin' t' notice as they 're always meetin' on th' stairs — an' him goin' into her flat, an' them talkin' an' laughin' together when you 're out o' th' way — ah," growled M'Ginnis, between grinding white teeth, "an' likely as not kissin' an' squeezin' in corners — "

"That 's enough — that 's enough!" cried the boy, fronting M'Ginnis, fierce-eyed. "Nobody ain't goin' t' speak about Hermy that way."

"Y' can't help it, Kid. Here 's this guy Geoff, this pal o' yours — been with her — in her flat with her, all th' mornin' — ain't he, Soapy?"

"'S' right, Kid!" nodded that pallid individual, the smouldering cigarette a-swing between pale lips; and, though he addressed Spike, his furtive eyes, watching aslant between narrowed lids, glittered to behold M'Ginnis's scowling brow; also the wolverine mouth curled faintly, so that the pendulous cigarette stirred and quivered.

"Oh, I 'm handin' ye the straight goods, Kid," M'Gin-

nis went on. "I 'm puttin' ye wise because you 're my pal, an' because I 've known Hermy an' been kind o' soft about her since we was kids."

"Well, then, you know she — she ain't that sort," said Spike, his voice quavering oddly. "So — don't you — say no more — see?"

"All right, Kid, all right — only I don't like t' see this pal o' yours gettin' in his dirty work behind your back. If anything happens — don't blame me — "

"What — what you tryin' t' tell me — you Bud?" questioned Spike, between quivering lips.

"I 'm tellin' ye things are gettin' too warm — oh, Hermy ain't the icicle she tries t' make out she is."

"An' I 'm tellin' you — you 're a liar, Bud M'Ginnis — a dirty liar!" cried the boy.

M'Ginnis's bull neck swelled; between his thick, black brows a vein swelled and pulsed. Viewing this, Soapy's glittering eyes blinked, and the pendulous cigarette quivered faintly again.

"Now by — " began M'Ginnis, lifting menacing fist; then his arm sank, and he shook his big, handsome head. "Oh, pshaw!" he exclaimed, "I guess you 're all worked up, Kid, so I ain't takin' no notice. But savvy this, Kid, if Hermy ain't goin' t' marry me on th' level, she ain't goin' t' let this guy have her — the other way — not much! I guess you ain't forgotten little Maggie Finlay? Well, watch out your pal Geoff don't make Hermy go th' same."

Uttering a wild, inarticulate cry, the lad sprang — to be caught in M'Ginnis's powerful grasp, but, even so, his fist grazed M'Ginnis's full-lipped mouth. For a moment Spike strove desperately to reach Bud's grim-smiling face until, finding his efforts vain, he ceased all at once, bowed his head upon his arms, and burst into a passion of bitter sobbing; then, with an agile twist, he wrenched himself free, and turning, sped away, heedless of his jaunty straw hat that had fallen and lay upon the dusty sidewalk. Languidly Soapy stooped and picked it up.

"His noo lid!" said he. "Only bought t'day, I reckon!"

"Gee!" exclaimed M'Ginnis, staring after Spike's fleeing figure, already far away, "he sure was some peevish!"

"Some!" nodded Soapy. "If he 'd happened t' have a gun handy, here 's where you 'd have cashed in for good, I reckon. Yes, Bud, you 'd be deader 'n' mutton!" sighed Soapy, turning Spike's hat around upon his finger. "You 'd be as dead as — little Maggie Finlay you was mentionin'!"

M'Ginnis wheeled so suddenly upon the speaker that he took a long step backward, but he still spun Spike's hat upon his finger, and the pendulous cigarette quivered quite noticeably. "Aw, quit it, Bud, quit it!" he sighed. "You know I ain't th' kind o' guy it 's healthy to punch around promiscuous."

"You mean if he 'd missed, there was you, eh?"

"Well, I dunno, Bud, if it had been my sister — maybe —"

"Oh, I know the sort o' dirty tyke you are, Soapy — but I 'm awake — an' I 've got you, see? If anything was t' happen t' me, I 've left papers — proofs — 'n' it 'ud be the chair for yours — savvy?"

"Anyway, Bud, I — I have n't got a sister," said Soapy, juggling deftly with the hat. "But there 's one thing, Bud, th' guy who gets actin' Mr. Freshy with Hermy is sure goin' to ante-up in kingdom come, if th' Kid 's around."

"You 're a dirty dog, Soapy, but you 've got brains in your ugly dome. I guess you 're right about th' Kid, an' that gives me an almighty good idea!" And M'Ginnis walked on awhile, deep in thought; and ever as he went, so between those pale and puffy lids two malevolent eyes watched and watched him.

"No," sighed Soapy at last, sliding a long, pale hand into the pocket of his smartly-tailored coat, "no, I ain't got a sister, Bud, but there was little Maggie Finlay. I kind o' used t' think she was all t' th' harps an' haloes. I

used t' kind o' hope — but pshaw! she 's dead — ain't she, Bud? "

" I guess so! " nodded M'Ginnis, yet deep in thought.

" An' buried — ain't she, Bud? "

" What th' hell! " exclaimed Bud, turning to stare, " what 's bitin' ye? "

" I 'm wonderin' ' why ', an' I 'm likewise wonderin' ' who ', Bud. Maybe I 'll find out for sure some day. I 'm — waitin', Bud, waitin'. Goin' around t' O'Rourke's, are ye? Oh, well, I guess I 'll hike along wid ye, Bud."

CHAPTER XIX

IN WHICH THE POISON BEGINS TO WORK

SPIKE sat glowering at the newspaper, yet very conscious, none the less, that Hermione often turned to glance at him wistfully as she bustled to and fro; at last she spoke.

"Arthur, dear — why so gloomy?"

"I ain't — I mean, I 'm not."

"You 're not sulking about anything?"

"No."

"Then you 're sick."

"I 'm all right."

"But you did n't enjoy your dinner a little bit."

"I — I was n't hungry, I guess," said Spike, frowning down at the paper. But Hermione was beside him, her cool fingers caressing his curls.

"Boy, dear — what is it?"

"Say, Hermy, where 'd you get them roses?" and he nodded to the flowers she had set among her shining hair.

"Oh, Mr. Geoffrey brought them."

"Been here, has he?"

"Yes, he came in with Ann this morning — why?"

"Did he — did he stay long?"

"N-o, I don't think so — why?"

"Comes round here pretty often, don't he?"

"Why, you see, he 's your friend, dear, and we are very near neighbours."

"Oh, I know all that, but — folks are beginning to — talk."

Hermione's smooth brows were wrinkled faintly and her caressing hand had fallen away.

"To talk!" she repeated, "you mean about — me?"

"Yes!" nodded Spike, avoiding her eyes, "about you and — him!"

"Well — let them!" she answered gently, "you and Ann are all I care about, so let them talk."

"But I — I don't like folks t' talk about my sister, an' it 's got t' stop. You got t' tell him so, or else I will. What 's he got t' go buying ye flowers for, anyway?"

Hermione's black brows knit in a sudden frown. "Arthur, don't be silly!"

"Oh, I know you think I 'm only a kid — but I ain't — I 'm not. If you can't take care of — of yourself, I must and — "

"Arthur — stop!"

"Well, but what 's he always crawlin' around here for?"

"He does n't crawl — he could n't," she cried in sudden anger; then in gentler tones, "I don't think you 'd better say any more, or maybe I shall grow angry. If you have grown to think so — so badly of him, remember I 'm your sister."

"But you 're a girl, an' he 's a man an' — "

"Stop it!" Hermione stamped her foot, and meeting her flashing glance, Spike wilted and — stopped it. So, while he glowered at the paper again, Hermione put away the dinner things, making more clatter about it than was usual, and turning now and then to glance at him from under her long lashes.

"Where did you meet M'Ginnis as you came home, Arthur?"

"At the corner of — say, who told you I met him?"

"You did."

"I never said a word about meetin' him."

"No, but you 've been telling me what he told you. Only M'Ginnis could be vile enough to dare say such things about me. Oh, Arthur, for shame — how can you listen to that brute beast — for shame!"

Now, meeting the virginal purity of those eyes, Spike felt his cheeks burn, and he wriggled in his chair.

"Bud only told me Geoff had been — been here," he stammered, "and I guess it was the truth — I — I mean — "

"Oh, boy, for shame!" and turning about, she swept from the room, her head carried very high, leaving him crouched in his chair, his nervous fingers twisting and turning a small box in his pocket — the box that held the forgotten hair-comb. He was still sitting miserably thus when he heard a knock on the outer door and a moment later a woman's voice, querulous and high-pitched.

"Oh, Miss Hermy, my Martin 's very bad t' night, an' I got t' go out, an' I can't leave him alone; would ye mind comin' down an' sittin' with him for a bit?"

"Why, of course I will."

"Y' see, since he had th' stroke, he 's sorrered for our little Maggie — he was hard on her, y' see, an' since she — she died — he 's been grievin' for her. Had himself laid in her little room — seemed to comfort him somehow. But to-day, when he heard we had to leave because th' rent was rose, it nigh broke his poor heart. An' I got to go out, an' I can't leave him alone, so — if y' would n't mind, Miss Hermy — "

"Just a moment — I 'll come right now." As she spoke, Hermione reëntered the kitchen, untying her apron as she came. Spike sat watching, waiting, yearning for a word, but without even a glance Hermione turned and left him. When he was alone, he started to his feet and tearing the box from his pocket dashed it fiercely to the floor; then as suddenly picked it up, and approaching the open window, drew back his hand to hurl it out and so stood, staring into the face that had risen to view beyond the window ledge, a round face with two very round eyes, a round button of a nose, and a wide mouth just now up-curving in a grin.

"Hey, you, Larry, what you hangin' around here for?" demanded Spike, slipping the box into his pocket again. "What you doin' on our fire escape, hey?"

"Brought back yer roof!" replied the lad.

"Well, where is it?"

"Here it is." And climbing astride the window sill, Larry handed in the jaunty straw.

"Where 'd you find it?"

"Bud give it me, 'n' say — "

"All right," nodded Spike, dusting the straw tenderly with a handkerchief. "Now git, I wanter be alone."

"But, say, Kid, Bud says I was ter say as he 's sorry for what he said, 'n' say, he says you 'd better be gettin' over t' O'Rourke's, 'n' say — "

"I ain't comin'!"

"But say, you 're t' fight Young Alf, 'n' say — "

"I ain't comin'!"

"But say, dere 's a lot of our money on ye — I got two plunks meself, 'n' say, you just gotter fight anyway. Bud says so — "

"I can't help what Bud says; I ain't comin'."

"Not comin'!" exclaimed Larry, his eyes rounder than ever.

"No!"

Larry's wide mouth curved in a slow grin, and he nodded his close-cropped head; said he:

"Say, Kiddo, you know Young Alf 's a punishin' fighter, I guess; you know as nobody 's never stopped him yet, don't yer; you know as you 're givin' him six pounds — say, you ain't — scared, are ye?"

"Scared?" repeated Spike, frowning. "Do I look like I was scared? You know there ain't any guy I 'm scared of — but I promised Hermy — "

"Pip-pip!" grinned Larry. "Say, if you don't turn up t' night, d' ye know what d' bunch 'll say? Dey 'll say you 're a — quitter!"

"Well, don't you say it, that 's all!" said Spike, laying aside his hat and clenching his fists.

"Not me!" grinned Larry. "There 'll be plenty to do that, I guess — dey 'd call it after ye in d' streets — dey 'll give ye th' ha! ha! Dey 'll say Hermy Chesterton's brother 's a quitter — a quitter!"

For a long moment Spike stood with bent head and hands tightly clenched, then crossing to the sideboard, he picked up his shabby cap.

"Who 's in my corner?"

"Now you 're talkin', Kiddo; I know as you —"

"Who 's in my corner?"

"Bud an' Lefty, 'n' say, I guess they can handle you all right, eh? 'N' say, come on, let 's cop a sneak before any one butts in — d' fire escape for ours, eh?"

"Sure!" said Spike, climbing through the window. "Oh, there ain't nobody goin' t' call Hermy Chesterton's brother a quitter."

"You bet there ain't!" grinned Larry, "come on, Kid!"

CHAPTER XX

OF AN EXPEDITION BY NIGHT

"WHY, Mr. Geoffrey, what you settin' here in the dark for?"

"Is it dark, Mrs. Trapes?"

"My land! Can't you see as it 's too dark t' see, and — oh, shucks, Mr. Geoffrey!"

"Certainly, Mrs. Trapes! But can't you see that the whole world — my world, anyway — is full of a refulgent glory, a magic light where nothing mean or sordid can possibly be, a light that my eyes never saw till now nor hoped to see, a radiance that may never fail, I hope — a — er — "

"Oh, go on, Mr. Geoffrey, go on. Only I guess I 'll light the gas jest the same, if you don't mind!" Which Mrs. Trapes did forthwith. "But what was you a-doin' of all alone in the dark?"

"Glorying in life, Mrs. Trapes, and praising the good God for health and strength to enjoy it and the fulness thereof — "

"'Fulness thereof' meanin' jest what, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"The most beautiful thing in a beautiful world, Mrs. Trapes."

"An' that 's Hermy, I s'pose. An' all that talk o' glory an' radiance an' magic light means as you 've been an' spoke, I guess?"

"It does."

"An' what did she say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothin'?"

"Not with her lips, but — "

"Oh — her eyes, was it? Mr. Geoffrey, I 'll tell you what — a girl may look 'yes' with her eyes a whole week an' say 'no' with her mouth jest once and mean 'no' — when it 's to a peanut man — Lordy Lord! what 's that?" And Mrs. Trapes jumped as a hand rapped softly on the door, and stared horrified to see a human head protrude itself into the room while a voice said:

"Da Signorina she out, so me come tell-a you piece-a-da-noos —"

"Why, if it ain't that blessed guinney! Go away — what d' ye want?"

Hereupon Tony flashed his white teeth, and opening the door, bowed with his inimitable grace, grew solemn, tapped his nose, winked knowingly, and laid finger to lip.

"My land!" said Mrs. Trapes, staring. "What 's the matter with the Eyetalian iji't now?"

"Spike — he go make-a-da-fight!" whispered Tony hoarsely.

"Eh — Arthur fightin' — where?"

"He go make-a-da-box — he drink-a-da-booze, den he walk-a — so! Den da Signorina she-a- cry —"

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes, "you mean as that b'y 's off boxin' again?"

"Si, si — he go make-a-da-box-fight."

"Is he over at O'Rourke's, Tony?" enquired Ravenslee, sitting upright.

"I bet-a-my-life, yes —"

"Oh, Mr. Geoffrey!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes, clasping bony hands. "If they bring him home drunk like they did last time!"

"They shan't do that, Mrs. Trapes. Don't worry, I 'll go and fetch him," said Ravenslee, getting to his feet.

"Fetch him? From O'Rourke's? Are ye crazy? You 'd get half-killed like as not. Oh, they 're a bad, ugly lot down there!"

"I feel rather ugly myself," said Ravenslee, looking around for the shabby hat; "anyway, I 'm going to see."

"Why, then, if you 're goin' t' venture among that lot, you take this with ye, Mr. Geoffrey," and she thrust the poker into his hand. "You 'll sure need it — ah, do now!" But Ravenslee laughed and set it aside. "You 'd better take it, Mr. Geoffrey; fists is fists, but gimme a poker — every time! A poker ain't t' be sneezed at! What, goin' — an' empty-'anded? Mr. Geoffrey, I 'm surprised at you. Think of Hermy!"

"That 's just what I am doing."

"Well, s'posin' they hurt you! What 'll Hermy do?"

"You think she 'd mind, then, though I 'm — only a peanut man?"

"Even a peanut man 's a feller creatur, ain't he — an' Hermy's 'eart is very tender an' — oh, shucks, Mr. Geoffrey, I guess you know she 'd jest be crazy if you was hurt bad!"

"Why, then," said Ravenslee, smiling and taking up the battered hat, "I 'll take great care of myself — trust me!"

"Then good-by, Mr. Geoffrey, good-by and — the good Lord go with you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Trapes," said Ravenslee and followed Tony out upon the stair. Upon one of the many landings the young Italian paused.

"Me put-a-you wise, Geoff; you savvy where-a to find Spike, now me go back t' my lil Pietro, yes. S' long, pal, 'n' good-a luck!"

Ravenslee hastened on down-stairs, returning neighbourly nods and greetings as he went, but staying for none, and so, crossing the court, turned into the avenue. On the corner he beheld the Spider, hard at work on his eternal chewing gum, cap drawn low and hands in pockets. Seeing Ravenslee, he nodded and lurched forward.

"What 's doin', Geoff?" he enquired.

"I 'm off to O'Rourke's — coming?"

"Not much! An' say, 't ain't worth your trouble — I ain't fightin'. Nawthin' but a lot o' fifth-raters."

"I 'm going over to fetch Spike."

"How much?" exclaimed the Spider, his square jaws immobile from sheer astonishment. "Say, you ain't crazy, are ye — I mean you ain't dippy or cracked in the dome, are ye? Because d' Kid 's goin' ten rounds with Young Alf, d' East Side Wonder, t'night, see?"

"Not if I can help it, Spider."

"Aw — come off, bo! D' ye think Bud 'll let him go?"

"I shan't ask Bud — or any one else."

"Meanin' as you 'll walk right in on Bud's tough bunch an' cop out d' Kid on y'r lonesome — eh?"

"I shall try."

"Then you sure are crazy; if y'r dome ain't cracked yet, it 's sure goin' t' be. Why, Bud 'n' his crowd 'll soak you good 'n' plenty 'n' chuck ye out again quicker 'n ye went in. They will sure, bo — if you go — "

"I 'm wondering if you 'll come along and help?" said Ravenslee lazily.

"Me? Not so 's you could notice it. I ain't huntin' that sort o' trouble."

"Oh, well, if you think you 'd — er — better not, I 'll go alone."

"What, yer goin', are ye?"

"Of course! You see, Spike is my friend; consequently his trouble is my trouble. Good night, Spider, and whatever else you do, be sure to — er — take good care of yourself!" And Ravenslee smiled and turned away; but he had not gone six paces before the Spider was at his elbow.

"Say, bo," said he, "I don't like the way you smile, but you talk so soft an' pretty, I guess I 'll jest have t' come along t' gather up what they leave of ye."

"Spider," said Ravenslee, "shake!" The Spider obeyed, somewhat shamefacedly to be sure.

"It looks like two domes bein' cracked 'stead o' one, an' all along o' that fool-kid!" Having said which, he lurched on beside Ravenslee, chewing voraciously.

"How you goin' t' work it?" he enquired suddenly.

"I don't know yet."

"Hully Chee! You 've sure gotcher nerve along. There 's some o' the toughest guys in little Manhattan Village at O'Rourke's dump t'night, keepin' th' ring an' fair achin' for trouble."

"We must dodge 'em, Spider."

"S'pose we can't?"

"Then we must trust our luck, and I 've got a hunch we shall get Spike away somehow before Mr. Flowers dopes him or makes him drunk; anyway we 'll try. The dressing rooms are behind the annex, are n't they?"

"Know the place, do ye?"

"I 've looked it over. We can get in behind the annex, can't we?"

"In?" repeated the Spider, smiling grimly. "Oh, we 'll get in all right; what gets my goat is how we 're goin' t' get out again. You sure are a bird for takin' chances, Geoff."

"Life is made up of chances, Spider, and there are two kinds of men — those who take them joyfully and those who don't."

"Well, say, you can scratch me on the joyful business. I 'm th' guy as only takes chances he 's paid t' take."

"How much are you getting on this job, Spider?"

"Oh — well — I mean — say, what 's th' time, bo?"

"Five minutes after eight — why?"

"I guess d' Kid 's in th' ring, then. There 's a full card t'night, an' he 's scheduled for eight sharp, so I reckon he 's fightin' now — an' good luck to him!" By this time they had reached that dark and quiet neighbourhood where stood O'Rourke's saloon. But to-night the big annex glared with light, and the air about it was full of a dull, hoarse, insistent clamour that swelled all at once to a chorus of discordant shrieks and frenzied cries.

"Ah!" quoth the Spider sagely, "hark to 'em howl! That means some guy 's gettin' his, alright. Listen to 'em; they love t' get blood for their entrance money, an' they 're sure gettin' it. Some one 's bein' knocked out — come on!"

It was a dark night, for there was no moon and the stars were hidden; thus, as Ravenslee followed the Spider, he found himself stumbling over the uneven ground of a vacant lot, a lonely place beyond which lay the distant river. At last they reached various outbuildings, looming up ugly and ungainly in the dimness.

"Say, bo," said the Spider, stopping suddenly at a small and narrow door, "you 'd best wait here and lemme go first."

"No, we 'll go together."

"Right-o, only be ready to make a quick get-away!" So saying, the Spider opened the door and, closely followed by Ravenslee, stepped into a dimly-lit passage thick with the blue vapour of cigars and cigarettes. It was a long, narrow corridor, bare and uncarpeted, seeming to run the length of the building; on one hand was a row of dingy windows and on the other were several doors, from behind which came the sound of many voices that talked and sang and swore together, a very babel.

At the end of this passage was yet another door which gave upon a small room that contained a rickety sofa, a chair, and a battered desk; a kerosene lamp suspended against the wall burned dimly, and it was into this chamber that the Spider ushered Ravenslee somewhat hastily; the Spider's eyes were very bright, and he chewed rather more fiercely than usual.

"Bo," said he, "this place ain't exactly a bed o' roses for a strange guy like you. Y' see, this is Bud's own stampin'-ground, an' the whole bunch is here t'night, and most of 'em are heeled. Soapy an' Bud always tote guns, I know. So I guess you 'd better mark time here a bit while I chase around an' locate th' Kid. If any one asks what you 're doin' around here, say as you come in with me. But, bo" — and here the Spider laid an impressive hand on Ravenslee's arm — "if you should happen t' see Bud, well, don't stop to look twice but beat it — let it be th' door or winder for yours — only — beat it!"

"Oh, why?"

"Well, I know Bud 's got it in fer you; I heard him say — oh, well, if his gun should go off — accidental-like, this place ain't exactly Broadway or Fifth Av'noo, bo — see?"

"I see!" nodded Ravenslee.

"Hold on!" said Spider, and crossing to the window, he unlatched it stealthily and lifted it high, "if I ain't back inside of ten minutes, bo, nip out through here and hike; wait for me at the lamp-post across the lot over there — it 'll be safer. D' ye get me?"

"I do!" nodded Ravenslee.

"I guess you 'd be less of a fool if you was to get out now an' wait — outside!" Spider suggested.

Ravenslee shook his head.

"I 'll wait here," said he, "there are times when I can be as big a fool as the next, Spider, and this is one of them."

"That 's so!" nodded the Spider, and chewing viciously, he turned and was gone, to be hailed a few minutes later in uproarious greeting by many discordant voices which died slowly to a droning hum above which came sounds more distant, shouts and cheers from the auditorium.

Left alone, Ravenslee looked about him, and then espied a newspaper that lay upon the desk. Idly taking it up, his gaze was attracted by these words, printed in large black letters:

NOTORIOUS CRIMINAL RUN TO EARTH
JACOB HEINE THE GUN-MAN
ARRESTED IN JERSEY CITY

Below in small type he read this:

> Jacob Heine, believed to be the perpetrator of several mysterious shooting affrays, and member of a dangerous West Side gang, was arrested to-day.

The light being dim, Ravenslee drew closer to the lamp, and standing thus against the light, his face was in

shadow — also his long figure was silhouetted upon the opposite wall, plain to be seen by any one opening the door. Suddenly, as he stood with head bent above the paper, this door opened suddenly, and M'Ginnis entered; he also held a paper, and now he spoke without troubling to lift his scowling gaze from the printed column he was scanning:

"That you, Lefty? Here 's a hell of a mix-up — that dog-gone fool Heine 's got himself pinched — and in Jersey City too! I told him t' stay around here till things was quiet! It 's goin' t' be a hell of a job t' fix things for him over there — 't ain't like N' York. But we got t' fix things for him or chance him squealing on th' rest of us, but what beats me is — "

M'Ginnis's teeth clicked together, and the paper tore suddenly between his hands as, glancing up at last, he beheld two keen, grey eyes that watched him and a mouth, grim and close-lipped, that curled in the smile Spider did n't like.

For a long, tense moment they stood motionless, eye to eye, then, reaching behind him, M'Ginnis locked the door, and drawing out the key, thrust it into his pocket.

"So — I got ye at last — have I?" said he slowly.

"And I 've got you," said Ravenslee pleasantly; "we seem to have got each other, don't we?"

"See here, you," said M'Ginnis, his massive shoulders squared, his big chin viciously outthrust, "you 're goin' t' leave Mulligan's, see?"

"Am I?" said Ravenslee, lounging upon a corner of the battered desk.

"You sure are," nodded M'Ginnis. "Hell's Kitchen ain't big enough for you an' me, I guess; you 're goin' because I say so, an' you 're goin' t'night!"

"You surprise me!" said Ravenslee sleepily.

"You 're goin' t' quit Hell's Kitchen for good and — you ain't comin' back!"

"You amaze me!" and Ravenslee yawned behind his hand.

"An' now you 're goin' t' listen why an' wherefore — if you can keep awake a minute!"

"I 'll try, Mr. Flowers, I 'll try."

M'Ginnis thrust clenched hands into his pockets and surveyed Ravenslee with scornful eyes — his lounging figure and stooping shoulders, his long, white hands and general listless air.

"God!" he exclaimed, "that she should trouble t' look twice at such a nancy-boy!" and he spat, loud and contemptuously.

"Almost think you 're trying to be rude, Mr. Flowers."

"Aw — I could n't be, to a — thing like you! An' see here — me name 's M'Ginnis!"

"But then," sighed Ravenslee, "I prefer to call you Flowers — a fair name for a foul thing — "

M'Ginnis made a swift step forward and halted, hard-breathing and menacing.

"How much?" he demanded.

"Fair name for a very foul thing, Mr. Flowers," repeated Ravenslee, glancing up at him from under slumberous, drooping lids — "anyway, Flowers you will remain!" As they stared again, eye to eye, M'Ginnis edged nearer and nearer, head thrust forward, until Ravenslee could see the cords that writhed and swelled in his big throat, and he hitched forward a languid shoulder. "Don't come any nearer, Flowers," said he, "and don't stick out your jaw like that — don't do it; I might be tempted to try to — er — hit it!"

"What — you?" said M'Ginnis, and laughed hoarsely, while Ravenslee yawned again.

"An' now, Mr. Butt-in, if you 're still awake — listen here. I guess it 's about time you stopped foolin' around Hermy Chesterton — an' you 're goin' t' quit — see!" Ravenslee's eyes flashed suddenly, then drooped as M'Ginnis continued: "So you 're goin' t' sit down right here, an' you 're goin' t' write a nice little note of farewell, an' you 're goin' t' tell her as you love her an' leave her because I say so — see? Ah!" he cried, suddenly hoarse

and anger-choked, "d' ye think I 'll let Hermy look at a thing like you — do ye? — do ye?" and he waited. Ravenslee sat utterly still, and when at last he spoke his voice sounded even more gentle than before.

"My good Flowers, there is just one thing you shall not do, and that is, speak her name in my hearing. You 're not fit to, and, Mr. Flowers, I 'll not permit it."

"Is that so?" snarled M'Ginnis, "well, then, listen some more. I know as you 're always hangin' around her flat, and if Hermy don't care about losing her good name — "

Even as Ravenslee's long arm shot out, M'Ginnis side-stepped the blow, and Ravenslee found himself staring into the muzzle of a revolver.

"Ah — I thought so!" he breathed, and shrank away.

"Kind of alters things, don't it?" enquired M'Ginnis, hoarse and jeering. "Well, if you don't want it to go off, sit down an' write Hermy as pretty a little note as you can — no, shut that window first."

Silent and speechless, Ravenslee crossed to the window and drew down the sash, in doing which he noticed a dark something that crouched beneath the sill.

"An' now," said M'Ginnis, leaning against a corner of the desk, "sit down here, nice an' close, an' write that letter — there 's pen an' ink an' paper — an' quick about it or by — "

M'Ginnis sprang up and turned as the glass of the window splintered to fragments, and, almost with the crash, Ravenslee leapt — a fierce twist, a vicious wrench, and the deadly weapon had changed hands.

"Lucky it did n't go off," said Ravenslee, smiling grimly at the revolver he held, "others might have heard, and, Mr. Flowers, I want to be alone with you just a little longer. Of course, I might shoot you for the murderous beast you are, or I might walk you over to the nearest police depot for the crook I think you are — but — oh, well, of late I 've been yearning to get my hands on you and so " — Ravenslee turned and pitched the revolver through the broken window. But, almost as the weapon left his

hand, M'Ginnis was upon him, and, reeling from the blow, Ravenslee staggered blindly across the room, till stayed by the wall, and sank there, crouched and groaning, his face hidden in his hands.

With a cry hoarse and fierce, M'Ginnis followed and stooped, eager to make an end — stooped to be met by two fierce hands, sure hands and strong, that grasped his silken neckerchief as this crouching figure rose suddenly erect. So for a wild, panting moment they grappled, swaying grimly to and fro, while ever the silken neckerchief was twisted tight and tighter. Choking now, M'Ginnis felt fingers on his naked throat, iron fingers that clutched cruelly, and in this painful grip was whirled, choking, against the wall and thence borne down and down. And now M'Ginnis, lying helpless across his opponent's knee, stared up into a face pale but grimly joyous, lips that curled back from gnashing white teeth — eyes that glared merciless. So Ravenslee bent M'Ginnis back across his knee and choked him there awhile, then suddenly relaxed his hold and let M'Ginnis sink, gasping, to the floor.

"A little — rough, Mr. Flowers," he panted, "a trifle — rough with you — I fear — but I want you — to know that you — shall not utter — her name — in my presence. Now the key — I prefer door to window — the key, Mr. Flowers — ah, here it is!" So saying, Ravenslee stood upright, and wiping blood and sweat from him with his sleeve, turned to the door. "One other thing, Mr. Flowers; have the goodness to take off your neckerchief next time, or I — may strangle you outright."

Halfway down the passage Ravenslee turned to see Murder close on his heels. Once he smote and twice, but nothing might stay that bull-like rush and, locked in a desperate clinch, he was borne back and back, their trampling lost in the universal din about them, as reeling, staggering, they crashed out through wrecked and splintered door and, still locked together, were swallowed in the night beyond.

Thus the Spider, crouching in the dark beneath the broken window with Spike beside him, was presently aware of the sickening sounds of furious struggling close at hand, and of a hoarse, panting voice that cursed in fierce triumph — a voice that ended all at once in a ghastly strangling choke; and recognising this voice, the Spider hunched his great shoulders and bore Spike to a remote spot where stood a solitary lamp-post. Here he waited, calm-eyed and chewing placidly, one arm about the fretful Spike.

Presently Ravenslee joined them; the shabby hat was gone, and there was a smear of blood upon his cheek, also he laboured in his breathing, but his eyes were joyous.

"Bo, what about Bud?"

"Oh, he 's lying around somewhere."

"Hully Chee — d' ye mean — "

"He tried gouging first, but I expected that; then he tried to throttle me, but I throttled a little harder. He 's an ugly customer, as you said, but " — Ravenslee laughed and glanced at his bloody knuckles — "I don't think he 'll be keen to rough it with me again just yet."

"Bo, I guess you can be pretty ugly too — say, when you laugh that way I feel — kind of sorry for Bud."

"Why, what 's wrong with Spike?"

"Dunno — I guess they 've been slinging dope into him. And he 's copped it pretty bad from Young Alf too — look at that eye!"

"Spike!" said Ravenslee, shaking him, "Spike, what is it? Buck up, old fellow!" But Spike only stared dazedly and moaned.

"It 's dope all right," nodded the Spider, "or else Bud 's mixed th' drinks on him."

"Damn him!" said Ravenslee softly. "I wish I 'd throttled a little harder!"

"I guess you give Bud all he needs for the present," said Spider grimly, "anyway, I 'm goin' t' see. The Kid ain't hurt none. Get him home t' bed, an' he 'll be all right — s' long, Geoff."

"Good night, Spider, and — thank you. Oh, by the way, who 's Heine?"

"Heine 's a Deutscher, Geoff. Heine 's about as clean as dirt an' as straight as a corkscrew; why, he 'd shoot his own mother if y' paid him, like he did — but say, what d' you know about him, anyway?"

"Well, for one thing, I know he 's been arrested in Jersey City —"

"Heine? Pinched? Say, bo, what yer givin' us — who says so?"

"Bud, and — "

But the Spider, waiting for no more, had turned about and was running back across the open lot.

CHAPTER XXI

HOW M'GINNIS THREATENED AND — WENT

"Mr. Geoffrey, prayer is a wonderful prop to a anxious 'eart!" said Mrs. Trapes, leaning over the banisters to greet him as he ascended. "Mr. Geoffrey, my hands has been lifted in prayer for ye this night as so did me behoove, and here you are safe back with — that b'y. A prayer prayed proper, and prayed by them as ain't plaguein' the Lord constant about their souls an' other diseases, is always dooly regarded. Yes, sir, a occasional petition is always heard and worketh wonders as the — my land, Mr. Geoffrey, look at your face!"

"I know, Mrs. Trapes. Has she come in yet?"

"Not yet — an' glad I am. You 're all bleedin' — stoop your head a bit — there!" and very tenderly she staunched the cut below the curly hair with an apron clean and spotless as usual. "And the b'y — lord, what 's come to him?"

"A black eye — two, I 'm afraid. Anyhow, I 'll look after him and get him into bed before she comes; can you keep her away till I 've done so?"

"I 'll try. Poor lad!" she sighed, touching Spike's drooping head with bony fingers, "if she was n't his sister, I 'd be sorry for him!"

So Ravenslee took Spike in hand, bathing his bruised and battered features and setting ice water to his puffy lips, which the lad gulped thirstily. Thereafter he revived quickly but grew only the more morose and sulky.

"All right," he muttered, "I 'll go t' bed, only — leave me, see!"

"Can't I help you?"

"No — you lemme alone. Oh, I know — you think I 'm soused, but I ain't; I — I 'm not drunk, I tell ye — I wish I was. I ain't no kid, so lemme alone — an' I ain't drunk. What if me legs is shaky? So 'ud yours be if you 'd got — what I got. It was dat last swing t' d' jaw as done me — but I ain't drunk 'n' I ain't a kid t' be undressed — so chase ye'self an' lemme alone!"

"All right, Spike — only get to bed like a good chap before your sister comes."

"You leave my sister alone; she ain't — that kind, an' she ain't fer you, anyway."

"That will do, Arthur — get into bed! I 'll give you five minutes!" So saying, Ravenslee turned away, but, as he closed the door, his quick ear detected the clink of glass, and turning, he saw Spike draw a small flask from his pocket.

"Give me that stuff, old fellow."

"Oh, you can't con me! I ain't a kid, so you lemme alone!" and Spike raised the flask to his lips, but in that instant it was snatched away. Spike staggered back to the wall and leaned there, passing his hand to and fro across his brow as though dazed, then stumbled out into the room beyond.

"Gimme it, Geoff, gimme it!" he panted, "you won't keep it, no, no — Bud slipped it to me after I come to. Gimme it, Geoff. I want t' forget — so be a sport an' give it me — you will, won't ye?"

Ravenslee shook his head, whereat the boy broke out more passionately:

"Oh — don't ye see, Geoff — can't ye understand? I — I was knocked out t'night — I took th' count! I — I 'm done for, I had me chance, an' I did n't make good! I — did n't — make good!" As he spoke, the lad hid his bruised face within his hands, while great sobs shook him.

"Why, Spike! Why, Arthur, old chap — never mind —"

"Gimme th' bottle, Geoff! Be a pal an' gimme th' stuff — I want t' forget!"

"This would n't help you."

"Give it me, d' ye hear — I want it — I 'll have it, anyway — I 'll — " Spike's voice failed, and cowering back, he sank into a chair at sight of her who stood within the doorway so very silent and pale of lip.

"Ah, don't, Hermy — don't look at me like that," he whispered. "Your eyes hurt me! I ain't drunk — this time!"

"Oh, boy!" she sighed, "oh, boy — after all your promises!"

Spike rose with hands stretched out appealingly, but even so, he swayed slightly, and seeing this, she shivered.

"Is it th' fightin' you mean, Hermy? Why, I did it all for you, Hermy, all for you — I wanted t' be a champion 'cause all champions are rich. I wanted t' make you a real lady — t' take you away from Mulligan's — but now — I 'm only — a 'has-been.' I 've lost me chance — oh, Hermy, I 'm done for; I — oh, Geoff, I — think I 'll — go to bed."

So Ravenslee set down the flask, and, clasping an arm about Spike's swaying form, led him from the room, while Hermione stood rigid and watched them go. But when the door had closed behind them, she bowed her head upon her hands and sobbed miserably, until, spying the half-emptied flask through her tears, she sprang forward, and snatching it from the table, dashed it passionately to the floor.

"Oh, dear God of Heaven!" she whispered, sinking to her knees, "not that way — ah, save him from that — keep him from treading that path!" With head bowed upon her folded hands she knelt thus awhile until a sound in the passage aroused her, and rising to her feet, she turned and confronted Bud M'Ginnis.

He stood upon the threshold, and though his glowing, eager eyes dwelt yearningly upon her beauty, he made no motion to enter the room. Upon one cheek the skin was torn and grazed from nose to ear, and upon his powerful throat were vivid marks that showed fierce and red, and these seemed to worry him, for even while he stared upon

her loveliness, his hand stole up to his neck, and he touched these glowing blotches gently with his fingers.

"God, Hermy," said he at last, "you get more beautiful every day!"

She was silent, but reading the fierce scorn in her eyes, he laughed softly and leaned nearer. "Some day, Hermy, you 'll be — all mine! Oh, I can wait; there 's others, an' you 're worth waitin' for, I guess. But some day you 'll come t' me — you shall — you must! Meantime there 's others, but some day it 'll be you an' you only — when you 're my wife. Ah, marry me, Hermy; I could give you all you want, an' there 'd never be any one else for me — then!"

Her eyes still met his unflinchingly, only she drew away from his nearness, shivering a little; seeing which, he frowned and clenched one hand, for the other had wandered up to his throat again.

"Won't ye speak t' me?" he demanded savagely, then shrugging his great shoulders, he continued in gentler tones: "I ain't here t' quarrel, Hermy; I only came t' see if th' Kid got home all right." Hermione's firm, red lips remained tightly closed. "Did he?" Hermione slowly inclined her head.

"Say now, Hermy," he went on, and his voice grew almost wheedling, "there was a guy here the other night — a stranger, I guess — one o' these tired, sleepy guys — one o' the reg'lar soft-talkin' nancy-boys — who is he?" Hermione only sighed wearily, whereat his voice grew hoarse with passion, and he questioned her fiercely: "Who is he, eh — who is he? What was he doin' around here, anyway? Well, can't ye talk? Can't ye speak?"

Hermione only looked at him, and before those calm, fearless eyes, M'Ginnis burned in a wild yet impotent rage.

"Won't talk, hey?" he questioned between grinding teeth. "Well, now, see here, Hermy. If you let this guy come any love business with you behind me back, it 'll be his finish — an' he can blame you for it! An' see here

again — watch out for young Arthur. Oh!" he cried, seeing her flinch, "you think you've got the Kid tied to ye, you think you've got him, I guess — but you ain't! I've got him — right here!" and holding out his hand, M'Ginnis slowly clenched it into a fist. "I've got th' Kid, see — an' he's goin' th' way I want him — he's got to, see?"

"Ah!" she cried, her scorn and fearless pride shattered to trembling pleading at last. "What do you mean — oh, what do you mean?"

"I mean as I want ye, an' I'm goin' to have ye!" he answered. "I mean that instead of 'no' you're goin' t' give me 'yes' — for th' Kid's sake!"

"What do you — mean?" she said again between quivering lips, her eyes full of a growing terror.

"Mean?" he continued relentlessly, viewing her trembling loveliness with hungry eyes. "Well — that's what I mean!" and he pointed to the broken flask upon the floor. "If you want t' see it in his face more an' more, if you want t' smell it in his breath — say 'No!' If you want t' see his hands begin t' shake, if you want t' hear his foot come stumbling up th' stair — say 'No!' I guess you remember what it's like — you've seen it all before. Well, if ye want Arthur t' grow into what his drunken father was before him — say 'No!'"

"Go away!" she moaned, "go away!"

"Oh, I'll go, but first I'll tell you this —"

"I think not, Mr. Flowers — no, I'm sure you won't!"

Ravenslee's voice was soft and pleasant as usual, but before the burning ferocity of his eyes, the merciless line of that grim, implacable mouth, before all the hush and deadly purpose of him, the loud hectoring of M'Ginnis seemed a thing of no account. Beholding his pale, set face, Hermione, sighing deeply, shrank away; even M'Ginnis blenched as, very slowly, Ravenslee approached him, speaking softly the while.

"Get out, Mr. Flowers, get out! Don't say another word — no, not one, if only because of 'that dog-gone fool

Heine!' Now go, or so help me God, this time — I 'll kill you!"

Hermione leaned her trembling body against the table for support. And yet — could it be fear that had waked this new glory in her eyes, had brought this glowing colour to her cheek, had made her sweet breath pant and hurry so — fear?

M'Ginnis stood rigid, watching Ravenslee advance; suddenly he tried to speak yet uttered no word; he raised a fumbling hand to his bruised and swollen throat, striving again for speech but choked instead, and, uttering a sound, hoarse and inarticulate, he swung upon his heel and strode blindly away.

Then Ravenslee turned to find Hermione sunk down beside the table, her burning face hidden between her arms, her betraying eyes fast shut.

"You are tired," he said gently, "that damned — er — I should say Mr. Flowers and — other unpleasant things have upset you, have n't they?"

Hermione made a motion of assent, and Ravenslee continued, softer than before:

"I wanted you to make up your mind to come away tonight, but — I can't ask you now, can I? It — it would n't be — er — the thing, would it?"

Hermione did n't answer or lift her head and, stooping above her, he saw how she was trembling; but her eyes were still fast shut.

"You — you 're not afraid — of me, are you, Hermione?"

"No."

"And you 're not — crying, are you?"

"No."

"Then I 'd — better go, had n't I? To Mrs. Trapes and supper — stewed beef, I think, with — er — carrots and onions —"

Her head was still bowed, and his tone was so light, his voice so lazy, how was she to know that his hands were quivering or see how the passion of his yearning was

shaking him, fighting for utterance against his iron will? How was she to know anything of all this until, swiftly, lightly, he stooped and kissed the shining glory of her hair? In a while she raised her head, but then — she was alone.

CHAPTER XXII

TELLS OF AN EARLY MORNING VISIT AND A WARNING

Ravenslee dreamed that he was in a wood — with Hermione, of course. She came to him through the leafy twilight, all aglow with youth and love, eager to give herself to his embrace. And from her eyes love looked at him unashamed, love touched him in her soft caressing hands, came to him in the passionate caress of her scarlet mouth, love cradled him in the clasp of her white arms. And the sun, peeping down inquisitively through the leaves, showed all the beauty of her and made a rippling splendour of her hair.

But now the woodpecker began a tap-tapping soft and insistent somewhere out of sight, a small noise yet disturbing, that followed them wheresoever they went. Thus they wandered, close entwined, but ever the wood grew darker until they came at last to a mighty tree whose sombre, far-flung branches shut out the kindly sun. And lo! within this gloom the woodpecker was before them — a most persistent bird, this, tap-tapping louder than ever, whereat Hermione, seized of sudden terror, struggled in his embrace and, pointing upward, cried aloud, and was gone from him. Then, looking where she had pointed, he beheld no woodpecker, but the hated face of Bud M'Ginnis —

Ravenslee blinked drowsily at the wall where purple roses bloomed, at the fly-blown text in the tarnished frame with its notable legend:

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

and sighed. But in his waking ears was the tap of the woodpecker, loud and persistent as ever! Wherefore he

started, stared, sat up suddenly and, glancing toward the window, beheld a large cap and a pair of shoulders he thought he recognised.

"Why, Spider!" he exclaimed, "what the —"

"Sufferin' Mike!" sighed the Spider plaintively, "here I 've been knockin' at your all-fired winder — knockin' an' knockin', an' here you 've been snorin' and snorin'."

"No, did I snore, Spider?"

"Bo, you sure are a bird for snorin'."

"Damn it!" said Ravenslee, frowning, "I must break myself of it."

"Thinkin' of gettin' married, bo?"

"Married? What the —"

"She 'll soon get useter it, I guess — they all do!" said the unabashed Spider. "Anyway, if you did n't snore exactly, you sure had a strangle hold on the snooze business, all right. Here 's me crawled out o' me downy little cot t' put ye wise t' Bud's little game, an' here 's you diggin' into the feathers t' beat th' band!"

"But the window was open; why did n't you come in right away?"

"Not much, bo, I ain't the kind o' fool as makes a habit o' wakin' your kind out o' their beauty sleep sudden, no more I ain't a guy as takes liberties in strange bedrooms, see?"

"Well, come in, Spider — sit on the bed; I have n't a chair to offer. By the way, I have to thank you —"

"Whaffor?"

"Breaking that window —"

"Oh, I guess it was n't a bad wheeze."

"It gave me the chance I wanted, Spider."

"Which you sure gripped with both mitts, bo!"

"Now have a cigar — in that coat pocket —"

"Not me, Geoff! Smoke 's bad for th' wind, that 's why I 've took t' gum." Saying which, the Spider proceeded to take out and open a packet of that necessary adjunct, and having posted it into his mouth piece by piece, fell to grim mastication.

"Bo," said he suddenly, "you come away without your roof last night."

"Eh?" said Ravenslee, blinking drowsily, "my what?"

"Your lid, bo."

"You mean my old hat?"

"That 's what I 'm tryin' t' tell you — an' say, that sure is the hardest bean cover I ever spotted; made of iron, is it? Where 'd you find it?"

"At some dim and distant day it originated in England, I believe."

"Well, that lid would turn a poleaxe, sure; that 's why I brought it back — it 's out on the fire escape now."

"Very kind of you, Spider, but — "

"Bo, you 're goin' t' need that hat an' a soot o' tin underwear from now on unless — well, unless you pack y'r trunk an' clear out o' Hell's Kitchen on th' jump."

"Why so?"

"Well, you certainly handed Bud a whole lot more 'n he 's ever had before, an' it 's a full house to a pair o' dooces he ain't lookin' for no more from you just yet. But then, Bud ain't no pet lamb nor yet a peace conference, an' it 's four aces to a bum-flush he means t' get back at ye some way — an' get ye good!"

"Oh?" said Ravenslee, yawning.

"And oh some more!" nodded the Spider; "it 's sure comin' t' you. When I got back las' night, there 's Bud settin' against th' wall lookin' like an exhibit from the morgue, fightin' for breath t' cuss you with. 'N' say, you sure had done him up some, which I was n't nowise sad or peeved about, no, sir! Me an' Bud 's never been what you might call real kittenish an' playful together. But it seems you ain't only soaked an' throttled him good an' plenty, but he 's gone an' let out t' you about that guy Heine — an' consequently you 've gotter be kept from opening y'r mouth — see? Consequently it 's you for a sudden an' hasty hike."

"Oh?" said Ravenslee again.

"Twice!" nodded the Spider, "with a F an' a L thrown

in — that 's what you 'll be, Geoff, if you try t' buck Bud an' th' gang. So here I 've shinnied up y'r fire escape to put ye wise an' lend a hand to make your swift get-away."

Ravenslee sighed and settled his head more comfortably on his pillow. "You think I ought to go, Spider?"

"I don't think — I know! Your number 's up, Geoff — it 's you against th' field, an', bo — they 're some field!"

"You think there 's real danger, then?" enquired Ravenslee, staring up at the fly-blown text with shining eyes.

"As real as — death, bo!"

"Not so long ago I regarded Death as my best friend —"

"How much?" demanded the Spider, suspending mastication.

"Nothing, Spider, a mere passing thought."

"Well, I 'm tellin' ye they 'll get ye sure — it 'll be th' water or a forty-four bullet, or a blackjack or a knife — but you 'll get it one way or another!"

"Sounds cheering!"

"An' it ain't over-pleasant t' be sandbagged."

"No, Spider."

"Nor t' feel a lead pipe wrapped round th' back o' y'r bean."

"No indeed, Spider."

"Nor yet t' feel a stiletta diggin' between y'r shoulders or over y'r collar bone."

"Worst of all, Spider."

"Well, you 'd best pack y'r little trunk an' fade away, bo!" Ravenslee sat up suddenly and looked at the Spider with eyes very bright and wide.

"Not for all the gangs that ever ganged!" said he softly.

"Eh?" exclaimed the Spider, staring, "what 's yer game?"

"I 'm going to try to buck this gang clean out of existence."

"You are, eh?"

"I am."

"Bo," sighed the Spider, shaking his head, "you ain't a ordinary fool — you 're a damned fool!"

"And you 're going to help me, Spider!"

"Not me, bo, not me — I 'm only just an ordinary fool!"

"Well, we 'll let it go at that!" said Ravenslee, and lying back, he yawned again.

"Don't do that, bo, don't do that!" exclaimed the Spider. "I 'm thinkin' what you 'll look like after you 've been floatin' around in th' river — a week, say! You 'd best get out o' Hell's Kitchen, bo — don't stop to ask where to, but — go there."

"My Spider," said Ravenslee, shaking his head, "in Hell's Kitchen I should have to leave all that makes life worth while, so — I shall stay, of course, and chance the — er — river and things."

"Well, I guess it 's your trouble, not mine."

"But I want it to be yours too, Spider. You see, I 'm counting on you to help me smash this gang."

"Bo, it looks like you 're goin' t' do a hell of a lot o' countin' — an' then some more, before you count me in on this fool game. Say" — he paused to stare at Ravenslee, keen-eyed and with jaws clamped rigid — "you ain't a fly-cop — one o' these sleuthy gum-shoe men, are ye?"

"No."

"Well, you ain't one o' these fool amateur guys doin' the dare-devil detective act like you read about in th' magazines, are ye?"

"No more than you are one of these dirty gang loafers you hear about around O'Rourke's — and that 's why you 're going to help me root 'em out."

"Sufferin' Pete!" sighed the Spider, "here I keep tellin' you I ain't on in this act, an' here you keep on ringin' me in frequent all the same."

"Because you are a man, Spider Connolly, and white all through, and because to smash up this gang is going to be man's work."

"Well, it sure ain't no job for Sophy the Satin-skinned Show-girl — nor yet for two nice, quiet little fellers like you an' me."

"We shan't be quite alone, Spider."

"That 's some comfortin', anyway!"

"There will be Joe Madden, for one."

"Joe Mad —" The Spider very nearly bolted his wad of chewing gum, then he rose and stood staring at Ravenslee, very round of eye. "So you know Joe Madden, the best all-round champion that ever happened, eh?"

"I box with him every day."

"Hully Chee!" exclaimed the Spider, and chewed fervently in silent astonishment. Suddenly he lifted his head and stood as one that hearkens to distant sounds, and crossing stealthily to the window, climbed out.

"What 's the matter?"

"Mother Trapes, bo. She 's just rollin' out o' th' feathers, an' she 's quite enough for me — always has me fazed to a frazzle. If she caught me here it 'ud be th' gimlet eye for mine — so here 's where I fade away."

"Anyway, come and have tea here with me to-night, Spider, unless you think I am — er — too dangerous to visit just now on account of M'Ginnis —"

"Dangerous?" repeated the Spider, scowling, "bo, when I get a call t' free food with a guy like you, danger gets lost in th' shuffle an' forgotten — I 'll be there. Now here 's your bean cover — catch! S' long!" And nodding, Spider promptly vanished down the fire escape.

CHAPTER XXIII

CHIEFLY CONCERNING A LETTER

"SUNDAY," said Mrs. Trapes sententiously, "Sunday is a holy day t' some folks an' a holiday for other folks, but t' folks like me an' Hermy it sure ain't no day of rest an' gladness — like the hymn book says."

"Is n't it?" said Ravenslee, pushing away his coffee cup and glancing toward the loud-ticking clock upon the sideboard.

"It sure ain't!" nodded Mrs. Trapes, quick to note the look. "Hermy an' me ain't much given to Sunday observance, Mr. Geoffrey. Y' see, there 's always meals t' be cooked an' washin' up t' be done, an' clo'es t' be mended p'raps. I 've darned many a 'eartfelt prayer into a wore-out pair o' stockin's before now an' offered up many a petition t' the Throne o' grace with my scrubbin' brush sloshin' over the floor. Anyway, Hermy 'n' me ain't never had much time for church-goin' or prayer meetin's or mindin' our souls in our best frocks an' bonnets — no, sir! We jest have t' get on with our work — sewin' an' cookin' an' washin' — mindin' the welfare of other folks' bodies. So while them as has time an' inclination sing their praises t' the Lord on their knees, Hermy an' me take out our praises in work, an' have t' leave our souls t' God an' — oh, well, I guess he 'll take care of 'em all right — don't y' think?"

"I certainly do!" nodded Ravenslee.

"O' course, my soul ain't all it should be — a bit stained here an' there, p'raps — a bit th' worse for wear, Mr. Geoffrey, but Hermy's — well, there, I guess it 's jest as sweet as a flower still, an' white — as white as that table-

cloth. An' talkin' about her soul — what about her body, Mr. Geoffrey?"

Ravenslee started. "Her body?" said he, staring. "Well, since you ask, I should say it is like her soul — very sweet and white and —"

"Sure!" nodded Mrs. Trapes, "but, bein' only flesh an' blood after all — bein' only miserable clay like yours an' mine, Mr. Geoffrey, it 'll always need food t' nourish it, clo'es t' keep it warm, an' a roof t' shelter it. Well, if she was t' be s' mad as t' marry a peanut man, what about food an' clo'es an' a roof?"

"I think they could be managed, Mrs. Trapes."

"What — out o' peanuts?"

"No — er — the fact is, I 've given 'em up."

Mrs. Trapes sniffed. "Y' don't say!" she remarked drily. "Think o' that, now!"

"The fact is, Mrs. Trapes, I — well, suppose I were to confess to you that I 'm not quite so poor as I seem — what should you say?"

"Why, I should say as I knew that about three weeks ago, Mr. Geoffrey."

"Oh, did you?" said Ravenslee, staring. "How in the world did you find out?"

"Why, Mr. Geoffrey, I 'll tell ye how. I got eyes an' I got ears, an' sometimes I can see a bit with my eyes an' hear with my ears — that 's how! Oh, I 've watched ye, Mr. Geoffrey — I 've watched ye careful because — well, because I sure love Hermy, an' 't would jest break my 'eart t' see her fallin' in love with a rogue!"

"So you think — that she is — falling in love, then?" enquired Ravenslee slowly.

"Well, Hermy 's Hermy, an' she 's wrote you two letters to my knowin' —"

"No, only one, Mrs. Trapes."

"Now Hermy ain't the kind o' girl t' write twice to a man unless —"

"But she has only written me one letter, Mrs. Trapes — the one she left with you last week."

"Oh, well — here 's the other!" said Mrs. Trapes, laying before him an envelope addressed in the handwriting he had come to know so well.

"Why did n't you give it to me before?" he enquired.

"Her orders, Mr. Geoffrey."

"Orders?"

"Orders!" nodded Mrs. Trapes. "She come in here last night an' give it me after you was gone t' bed. 'Ann dear,' she says, 'don't let him have it till half after ten t' morrer,' she says. An' it 's nearly eleven now — so there 's y'r letter!"

"But," said Ravenslee, "why on earth — "

"P'raps th' letter 'll tell you, Mr. Geoffrey; s'pose you read it while I clear away your breakfast things!"

Hereupon Ravenslee opened the letter and read these words:

My dear,

It would be my joy to trust myself to you utterly, to go with you to the world's end if you would have it so. Only I 'm afraid that I am not quite what you would have me. I 'm afraid that I might sometimes do things that would remind you that I had been only a scrubwoman. I 'm afraid that some day you might regret. Were I to answer you now, I should answer you selfishly — so, please, you must give me time to think, for both our sakes. Love has never come near me before, and now I am a little afraid, for love is not little and tender and babyish, but great and strong and very fierce and masterful — that is why I am afraid of it. So I must go away from you, from the sound of your voice, the touch of your hand — to think it all out. My work will take me to Englewood to-morrow, and I want you to wait for your answer until I come back, for then I shall have decided one way or the other. But in Englewood the memory of your words will be with me still — oh, did you mean all, quite all you said, and did you say quite all you meant to say — did you? Did you? For indeed it has seemed to me that if

you really meant all you said you might have said a little more — just a little more. This is a dreadfully long letter and very badly expressed, I know, but I dare not read it through. But what I have written is written from my heart.

HERMIONE.

P.S. I shall be in Englewood three whole days.

"Will strawberry jam an' angel cake an' a bunch or so o' water cress be enough, Mr. Geoffrey?"

Ravenslee sat staring down at the letter, rubbing his square, fresh-shaven chin as one very much at a loss.

"'Might have said a little more — just a little more,'" he muttered, his gaze focussed upon a certain line.

"Will water cress an' angel cake an' a pot o' strawberry jam soot, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"Now I wonder what the dickens she can mean?" mused Ravenslee.

"She means jest strawberry jam an' angel cake an' water cress, fer tea — fer your visitors," said Mrs. Trapes, with a patient sigh.

"Visitors!" repeated Ravenslee, glancing up. "Why, yes, they 'll be here about four o'clock."

"An' will water cress an' angel cake an' — "

"Quite enough! Certainly! Admirable!" exclaimed Ravenslee. "But what beats me," he continued, staring down at the letter again, "is what she can mean by writing this."

"Not knowin' what she 's wrote, I can't say."

"Mrs. Trapes, I know you are Hermione's best and staunchest friend, and lately I have ventured to hope you are mine too. As such, I want you to read this letter — see if you can explain it!"

So Mrs. Trapes took the letter; and when she had read it through, folded it together with hands very gentle and reverent and stood awhile staring out into the sunlit court.

"My land!" she said at last, her harsh voice grown almost soft, "love 's a wonderful thing, I reckon. No

wonder your eyes shine so. Yes, love 's a great an' wonderful thing — my land!"

"But can you explain," said Ravenslee, as he took back the letter, "can you tell me what she means by — "

"Shucks, Mr. Geoffrey! That sure don't want no explainin'. When you said all you did say to her, did y' say anything about 'wife' or 'marriage'? "

"Why, of course I did!"

"Sure? "

"Yes — er — that is — I think so."

"Not sure then? "

"Well, I may have done so — I must have done so, but really I — er — forget — "

"Forget!" Mrs. Trapes snorted. "Now look-a-here, Mr. Geoffrey, what d' ye want with Hermy; is it a wife you 're after or only — "

"Mrs. Trapes!" Ravenslee was upon his feet, and before the sudden glare in his eyes Mrs. Trapes gaped and for once fell silent. "Mrs. Trapes," said he, still frowning a little, "really you — you almost — made me angry."

"My land!" said she, "I 'm kind o' glad I did n't — quite!" and her sniff was eloquent.

"You see," he went on, glancing down at the letter again, "I 've learned to love and reverence her so much that your suggestion — hurt rather!"

"Why, then, Mr. Geoffrey, I 'm sorry. But if your love is so big an' true as all that — if you want her t' be a wife t' you — why in the 'tarnal did n't ye speak out an' tell her so? "

"I 'll go and tell her so this minute."

"Y' can't! She 's gone t' Bronx Park with that b'y, 'n' won't be back all day."

"Damn!" exclaimed Ravenslee.

"Sure!" nodded Mrs. Trapes. "Keep on, it 'll do ye good. But anyway, what y' got t' say 'll keep, I guess — it 'll gush out all the stronger fer bein' bottled up a day or two."

"I can write!" he suggested.

"You can — but you won't — you 'll tell her with your two lips — a woman likes it better spoke — if spoke proper — I should! With arms entwined an' eyes lookin' into eyes an' — oh, shucks! Will angel cake an' strawberry jam — "

"They 'll be ample, and — thank you, dear Mrs. Trapes!"

CHAPTER XXIV

HOW THE OLD UN AND CERTAIN OTHERS HAD TEA

"Old Un," said Joe, halting his aged companion in the middle of the second flight to wag a portentous finger, "Old Un, mind this now — if there should 'appen to be cake for tea, don't go makin' a ancient beast of yourself with it — no slippin' lumps of it into your pocket on the sly, mind, because if I ketch ye at it — "

"Don't be 'arsh, Joe, don't be 'arsh! Cake comes soft t' me pore old teef."

"An' mind this again — if there should be any jam about, no stickin' ye wicked old fingers into it an' lickin' 'em behind my back."

"You lemme an' the jam alone, Joe; it 's a free country, ain't it? — very well, then!"

"Free country be blowed! You mind what I say, you venerable old bag of iniquity, you!"

"'Niquity yerself!" snarled the Old Un, and snapping bony finger and thumb under Joe's massive chin, turned and went on up the stairs, his smart straw hat cocked at a defiant angle, his brilliant shoes creaking loudly at every step.

"Oh, Gorramighty!" he panted, halting suddenly on the fifth landing to get his breath, "these perishin' stairs 'as ketched my wind, Joe; it 's worse 'n th' treadmill! Is there many more of 'em?"

"Only six flights!" nodded Joe grimly.

"Six!" wailed the Old Un. "Lord — it 'll be the death o' me!"

"Well, it 's about time you was dead," nodded Joe.

"Dead ye'self!" snarled the old man. "I 'm a better figger of a man than ever you was —"

"An' you would come," continued Joe serenely, as he deftly resettled the old fellow's sporty bow-tie. "You fair plagued me to bring ye along, did n't ye, old packet o' vindictiveness?"

"Well, an' here I am, Joe, an' here I mean t' stay — no more climbin' fer me; I 'm tired, me lad, tired!" Saying which, the Old Un spread his handkerchief on a convenient stair and proceeded to seat himself thereon with due regard for his immaculately creased trousers.

"Well," growled Joe, "of all the perverse old raspers that ever I did see —"

"That 's enough, Joe, that 's enough!" exclaimed the Old Un, fanning himself with his rakish hat. "Jest bend down and flick the dust off me shoes with your wipe, like a good lad, will ye? That 's the worst o' these 'ere patent leathers; they looks well, but they sure ketches th' dust, Joe, they ketches the dust oncommon bad. So jest give 'em a flick over — me pore old back 's too stiff t' let me reach 'em, what wi' me rheumatiz an' a floatin' kidney or so —"

"Kidneys!" snarled Joe, drawing out a large bandanna handkerchief and polishing the old man's natty shoes until they shone resplendent. "What 's the matter with ye blessed kidneys now?"

"Don't I tell ye — they floats, Joe, they floats!"

"Float!" growled Joe. "Float — where to?"

"'Ere, there, an' everywhere, Joe, I can feel 'em! They 're always a-gettin' theirselves all mixed up any'ow. Oh, it 's an 'orrible complaint to 'ave kidneys like mine as gets theirselves lost."

"Wish they 'd lose you along with 'em!" growled Joe, shaking the dust from his handkerchief.

"Joe," said the old man, putting on his hat and blinking up at him beneath its jaunty brim, "Joe, sometimes I fair despise ye!"

"Well, despise away," nodded Joe, "only get up — stand up on them doddering old pins o' yourn."

"Not me!" declared the Old Un, "I ain't goin' to climb no more o' these perishin' stairs — no, not for you nor nobody. 'Ere I am, me lad, an' 'ere I sits till you give me a piggy-back up to the top — me bein' a pore old cove with rheumatiz. I demands it — "

"You 'll what?" growled Joe, hard-breathing and indignant.

"Demand it, Joe — a pore old feller wi' kidneys — an' every other ailment as flesh is hair to — a piggy-back, Joe — a piggy-back!"

Without another word Joe stooped, and lifting the old man beneath one arm, bore him up the stairs regardless of his croaking protestations and fierce invective.

"I said a piggy-back — oh, you blightin' perisher, I said a piggy-back," he snarled, his resplendent shoes twinkling in futile kicks. "Oh, Joe, there 's times when I fair 'ates ye!"

Thus, despite virulent curses and feeble kickings, Joe bore him on and up until, as he climbed the last flight, he was arrested by an exclamation from above, and glancing upward, beheld a tall, sharp-featured woman who leaned over the rail.

"Oh, land o' my fathers!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes, "what 's the matter — what you got there? Who are ye?"

"The matter, ma'am," answered Joe, for by this time the Old Un had cursed himself quite breathless, "the matter 's contrariness; what I 'ave under my arm, ma'am, is a old reprobate, and I 'm Joe Madden, ma'am, come to take tea with my — come, as you might say, a visiting to Mr. Geoffrey; p'raps you 'll —"

"Don't 'eed 'im, ma'am — never 'eed 'im!" croaked the Old Un, who had regained his wind by now. "'E 's a perishin' pork pig, that 's wot 'e is. Joe, you blighter, put me down. It 's me as the Guv expects — it 's me as 'as come a-visitin' — Joe, put me down, you perisher. Joe 's only a hoaf, ma'am, a nass, ma'am. Joe ain't used to perlite serciety, Joe don't know nothin' — put me down, Joe, like a good lad!"

At this juncture Ravenslee appeared, whereupon Joe, having reached the topmost landing, set the old man upon his natty feet and fell to straightening his smart clothes with hands big but gentle.

"Sir," explained Joe, answering Ravenslee's smiling look, "Old Sin an' Sorrer here would n't walk up, which forced me to — "

But now the Old Un, feeling himself again, cut in on his own account. "Ma'am," said he, flourishing off his hat to Mrs. Trapes, "'ere 's me an' me lad Joe come to tea — my best respex an' greetin's, ma'am. How do, Guv? I do 'ope as you ain't forgot th' cake."

"Oh, we 've plenty of cake, Old Un!" laughed Ravenslee.

"An' water cress an' jam!" nodded Mrs. Trapes.

"Guv," said the old man, gripping Ravenslee's hand, "God bless ye for a true man an' a noble sport. Ma'am, you 're a angel! Jam, ma'am — you 're a nymp' — you 're two nymp's —

> 'I oft would cast a rovin' eye
> Ere these white 'airs I grew, ma'am,
> To see a 'andsome nymp' go by,
> But none s' fair as you, ma'am.'

An' there 's me hand on it, ma'am."

"My land!" ejaculated Mrs. Trapes, staring; then all at once she laughed, a strange laugh that came and went again immediately, yet left her features a little less grim than usual, as, reaching out, she grasped the old man's feeble hand.

"I guess you 're only bein' p'lite," said she, "but jest for that you 're sure goin' t' eat as much cake an' jam as your small insides can hold." So saying, she led the way into her small and very neat domain and ushered them into the bright little parlour where the Spider sat already enthroned in that armchair whereon sunflowers rioted. Like the chair, the Spider was somewhat exotic as to socks and tie, and he seemed a trifle irked by stiff cuffs

and collar as he sat staring at the green and yellow tablecloth and doing his best not to tread upon the pink hearthrug.

"Joe," said Ravenslee, "this is Spider Connolly, who knocked out Larry McKinnon at San Francisco last year in the sixty-ninth. Spider, I want you to shake hands with — "

"Bo," exclaimed the Spider, rising reverently and taking a step toward Joe's massive figure, quite forgetful of the pink hearthrug now, "you don't have t' tell me nothin'. I guess I know th' best all-round fightin' man, the greatest champion as ever swung a mitt, when I see him! T' shake his hand 'll sure be — "

"Young feller, me lad," cried the Old Un, reaching out nimbly and catching the Spider's extended hand, "you got a sharp eye, a true eye — a eye as can discrimpinate, like — ah, like a flash o' light. You 're right, me lad, I was the best fightin' man, the greatest champeen as ever was — sixty odd years ago. Ho, yus, I were the best of 'em all, an' I ain't t' be sniffed at now. So shake me 'and, me lad — an' shake — hard!"

The Spider's grim jaw relaxed, and his eyes opened very wide as the Old Un continued to shake his hand up and down.

"But, say," said he faintly at last, "I don't — "

"No more don't I," nodded the Old Un, "what 's the old song say:

'I don't care if it rains or snows
Or what the day may be
Since 'ere 's a truth I plainly knows
Love, you 'll remember me.' "

"But say," began the bewildered Spider again. "Say, I reckon — "

"So do I," nodded the Old Un:

'I reckon up my years o' life
An' a good long life 'ave I.
Ye see, I never had a wife,
P'raps that 's the reason why.'

So take it from me, young feller, me cove, don't 'ave nothin' to do with givin' or takin' in marriage."

"Marriage?"

"Marriage ain't good for a fightin' cove — it spiles him, it shakes 'is nerve, it fair ruinates 'im. When love flies in at the winder, champeenships fly up the chimbley — never t' come back no more. So beware o' wives, me lad."

"Wives!" repeated the Spider, lifting free hand to dazed brow, "I — I ain't never — "

"That 's right!" nodded the Old Un heartily, shaking the Spider's unresisting hand again, "marriage ain't love, an' love ain't marriage. Wot 's the old song say:

'Oh, love is like a bloomin' rose
But marriage is a bloomin' thorn.
An 'usband 's full o' bloomin' woes
An' 'eaves a bloomin' sigh each morn —' "

"Why, Old Un!" exclaimed Ravenslee, "that 's a very remarkable verse!"

"My land!" ejaculated Mrs. Trapes, squaring her elbows in the doorway, "I suspects he 's a poet — an' him sech a nice little old gentleman!"

"A poet, ma'am!" exclaimed the Old Un indignantly, "not me, ma'am, not me — should scorn t' be. I 'm a 'ighly respected old fightin' man, I am, as never went on th' cross:

'A fightin' man I, ma'am,
An' wish I may die, ma'am,
If ever my backers I crossed;
An' what 's better still, ma'am,
Though I forgot many a mill, ma'am,
Not one of 'em ever I lost.' "

"My land!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes again. "What a memory!"

"Memory, ma'am!" growled Joe, "that ain't memory; 'e makes 'em up as 'e goes along — "

"Joe," said the Old Un, glaring, "if the lady were n't here, an' axin' 'er pardon — I 'd punch you in the perishin' eye-'ole for that!"

"All right, old vindictiveness," sighed Joe, "an' now, if you 'll let go of Spider Connolly's fist, I 'd like to say 'ow do. Sit down an' give some one else a chance to speak — sit down, you old bag o' wind — "

"Bag o' — " the old man dropped the Spider's nerveless hand to turn to Mrs. Trapes with a gloomy brow. "You 'eard that, ma'am — you 'eard this perishin' porker call me a bag o' — Joe, I blush for ye! Ma'am, pore Joe means well, but 'e can't 'elp bein' a perisher — but " — and here the Old Un raised and shook a feeble old fist — "I 've a good mind t' ketch 'im one as would put 'im t' sleep for a fortnight — I 've a good mind — "

But Mrs. Trapes caught that tremulous fist and drawing the Old Un's arm through her own, turned to the door.

"You come along with me," said she, "you shall help me t' get the tea; you shall carry in th' cake an' — "

"Cake!" exclaimed the Old Un, "Oh, j'yful word, ma'am; you 're a — a lidy! An' there 's jam, ain't there?"

"Strawberry!"

"Straw — oh, music t' me ears, ma'am — you 're a nymp' — lead me to it!" So saying, the Old Un followed Mrs. Trapes out into the kitchen, while the Spider stared after him open-mouthed.

"Sufferin' Pete!" he murmured, then, inhaling a long, deep breath, turned to grasp Joe's mighty, outstretched hand. Then, drawing their chairs together, they sat down, and Ravenslee, by an adroit question or two, soon had them talking, the Spider quick and eager and chewing voraciously, Joe soft-voiced and deliberate but speaking with that calm air of finality that comes only of long and varied experience. So, while Ravenslee smoked and listened, they spoke of past battles, of fights and fighters old and new; they discoursed learnedly on ringcraft, they discussed the merits of the crouch as opposed to the

stiff leg and straight left; they stood up to show tricks of foot and hand — cunning shifts and feints; they ducked and side-stepped and smote the empty air with whirling fists to the imminent peril of the owl that was a parrot, which moth-eaten relic seemed to watch them with his solitary glass eye. And ever the Spider's respect and admiration for the mild-eyed, quiet-spoken champion waxed and grew.

"Bo!" said he, dexterously catching the toppling bird, glass case and all, for the second time, and addressing Ravenslee with it clasped to his heart, "bo," he repeated, his eyes shining, "I guess Joe Madden, the greatest battler of 'em all, is — Joe Madden still. I 've always wanted t' meet with him, an' say — I would n't ha' missed him for a farm."

"Is that so!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes, entering the room at this moment with the tea-cloth, "well, now — you jest put 'im down — you jest put that bird back again, Spider Connolly!"

"Yes, ma'am," quoth the Spider, all abashed humility.

"What you doin' with it, anyway?" she demanded, elbows jutted ominously; "it 's lost a eye, an' a cat got it once an' sp'iled it some, but I treasure it fer reasons o' sentiment, an' if you think you c'n steal it — "

"Not 'im, ma'am, not 'im!" piped the Old Un from the doorway, "it ain't the pore lad's fault. It 's Joe, blame it all on to Joe — Joe 's got a bad 'eart, ma'am, a black, base-'earted perisher is Joe — so no jam for Joe, ma'am, an' only one slice o' cake."

Here Ravenslee hastened to explain, whereupon Mrs. Trapes's grimness abated, and her bristling elbows subsided; and now, perceiving how the abashed Spider, meeting her eye, flushed, plucked at his cuffs, and shuffled his feet, she reached out to pat his broad and drooping shoulder.

"Mister Connolly," said she, "for harsh words spoke in haste I craves now your pardon, an' I craves it — humble. Am I forgive?"

The Spider, flushing redder than ever, rose to his feet, seized her hand, shook it, and muttered: "Sure!"

When the table was laid, the Old Un proposed, and was duly seconded, thirded, and fourthed, that Mrs. Trapes be elected into the chair to pour out the tea, which she proceeded to do forthwith, while the Old Un, seated at her right hand, kept a wary eye roving between jam dish and angel cake. And by reason of the unwonted graciousness of Mrs. Trapes, of Ravenslee's tact and easy assurance, and the Old Un's impish hilarity, all diffidence and restraint were banished, and good fellowship reigned supreme, though the Spider was interrupted in the midst of a story by the Old Un suddenly exclaiming:

"Keep your hand out o' the jam, Joe!"

And Joe was later rendered speechless, hard-breathing, and indignant, by the Old Un turning to Mrs. Trapes with the shrill warning:

"Ma'am, Joe 's 'ad two 'elpin's o' cake an' got 'is 'orrid eye on what remains!"

Nevertheless, the meal was in all ways a success, and Ravenslee was reaching for his pipe when Mrs. Trapes, summoned to the front door by a feverish knocking, presently came back followed by Tony, whose bright eyes looked wider than usual as he saluted the company.

"Hey, Geoff, me tell-a you piece-a da-noos!" he cried excitedly, "big-a piece-a da-noos. Da cops go-a pinch-a Bud-a M'Ginn'!"

"Bud? Bud?" stammered the Spider. "Have they pinched Bud? Is this the straight goods, Tony?"

"Sure — they gott-a heem this-a morn in Jersey City — 'n' say, he think-a eet a frame-up — he theenk-a Geoff set-a de cops for-a take heem."

"The hell he does!" exclaimed the Spider, starting to his feet.

"So he send-a da word to Soapy," continued Tony, his eyes rolling, "an' now all-a da gang 's out layin' for-a Geoff. So when Geoff go-a out on da street — bingo! Dey snuff hees light out —"

"Not much they won't!" said the Spider, buttoning up his coat and turning to the door. "I'll mighty soon fix this, I guess."

"Do you think you can, Spider?" enquired Ravenslee. "If you 're going to have any trouble, don't bother about —"

"Bo," said the Spider, squaring his big jaw, "get onto this: here 's where I chip in with ye; from now on we 're in this game together, an' I ain't a guy as 'll lay down his hand till I 'm called — an' called good, see? You said it was goin' t' be a man's work — by Jiminy Christmas, it looks like you 're right; anyway, I stand in with you, that 's sure — put it there, bo!"

"But," said Ravenslee, as their hands gripped, "I don't want you to take any chances on my account, or run any —"

"Fudge, bo, fudge! I ain't takin' no chances —"

"Well, I 'm coming along to see you don't!" said Ravenslee, reaching for his hat.

"Not on your life, bo; you 'd queer th' whole show. Y' see, they 're a tough crowd an' apt t' act a bit hasty now an' then; 'sides, they might think you 're heeled, and they know I don't never carry a gun — they all know me —"

"Still, I 'm coming, Spider —"

"Y' can't, bo; Mrs. Trapes ain't goin' t' let ye — look at her!"

"You never spoke a truer word since you drawed the vital air, Spider Connolly!" nodded Mrs. Trapes, hands on hips and elbows at the "engage." "If Mr. Geoffrey stirs out this day, he 's jest gotter trample over my mangled remains, that 's all!"

Heeding the glitter in her eye and noting the inexorable jut of her elbows, Ravenslee sat down and went on filling his pipe.

"Y' see, bo, I know as it was n't you as give Bud away, an' the boys 'll listen t' my say-so — you bet they will. So here 's where I ooze away. S' long, all!"

The Old Un, having bolted the last handful of cake, got upon his legs and clutched the Spider's coat in talon-like fingers.

"'Old 'ard, young feller, me lad!" he cried. "If there 's any chance of a scrap comin' off — wot about me? Gimme me 'at, Joe, an' get yourn; if I don't knock some on 'em stone cold — call me a perishin' ass!"

"Why, since you say so, old blood an' bones," said Joe, his mild eye brightening, "we will step along with the Spider a little way if the Guv'nor 'll excuse us?"

"Certainly, Joe," nodded Ravenslee, "on condition that you do just as the Spider says."

"You mean, sir?"

"No fighting, Joe — at least, not yet."

"Trust me, sir! What ain't to be — yet, is to be sometime, I 'opes," sighed Joe.

"Good-by, Guv, good-by!" croaked the Old Un, "if I don't put some o' they perishers in the 'orspitals an' the infirmaries — I ain't the man I was —

> 'Oh, used am I to war's alarms
> I 'unger for the fray,
> Though beauty clasps me in 'er arms
> The trumpet calls away.'"

So having made their adieux, the three took their departure; though once, despite Joe's objurgations, the Old Un must needs come back to kiss Mrs. Trapes's toil-worn hand with a flourish which left her voiceless and round of eye until the clatter of their feet had died away.

Then she closed the door and fixed Ravenslee with her stoniest stare.

"Mr. Geoffrey," she demanded, "why did they call you 'Guv'nor', and wherefore 'Sir'?"

Ravenslee, in the act of lighting his pipe, had paused for a suitable answer, when Tony, who had remained mute in a corner, stepped forward and spoke:

"Say, Geoff, I got-a bit-a more noos. Old-a Finlay-a want-a spik with-a you —"

"Old Finlay — with me?"

"Sure. Old-a Finlay-a go die-a ver' queek, an' he want-a spik with-a you first."

"Dying! Old Finlay dying?" questioned Ravenslee, rising.

"Sure! He go die-a ver' queek."

"I 'll come!"

"An' I guess," said Mrs. Trapes, "yes, I opine as I 'll come along wi' ye, Mr. Geoffrey."

Old Martin Finlay lay propped up by pillows, his great, gaunt, useless body seeming almost too large for the narrow bed wherein he lay, staring up great-eyed at Ravenslee — live eyes in a dead face.

"It 's dying I am, sorr," said he faintly, "an' it 's grateful is ould Martin for the docthers and medicine you 've paid for. But it 's meself is beyand 'em all — an' it 's beyand 'em I 'm goin' fast. She 's waitin' for me — me little Maggie 's houlding out her little hand to me — she 's waitin' for me — beyand, Holy Mary be praised! An' she 's waited long enough, sorr, my little Maggie as I loved so while the harsh words burned upon me tongue — my little Maggie! I was bitter cruel to my little girl, but you 've been kind to me, and, sorr, I thank ye. But," continued the dying man, slowly and feebly, "it are n't to thank yez as I wanted ye — but to give yez something in trust for Miss Hermy — ye see, sorr, I shan't be here when she comes back to-night, I 'll be with — little Maggie when the hour strikes — my little Maggie! Norah, wife — give it to him."

Silently Mrs. Finlay opened a drawer, and turning, placed in Ravenslee's hand a heavy gold ring curiously wrought into the form of two hands clasping each other.

"It was my Maggie's," continued Martin, "an' I guess she valleyed it a whole lot, sorr. I found it hid away with odds and ends as she treasured. But she don't want it no more — she 's dead, ye see, sorr — I killed her — drowned, sorr — I drowned her. Cruel an' hard I was —

shut her out onto the streets, I did, an' so — she died. But before the river took — oh, Blessed Mary — oh, Mother O' God — pity! Before she went t' heaven, Miss Hermy was good t' her; Miss Hermy loved her and tried t' comfort her — but only God could do that, I reckon — so she went t' God. But Miss Hermy was kind when I was n't, so, sorr, it 's give her that ring ye will, plaze, an' say as poor Martin died blessing her. An' now it 's go I 'll ask ye, sorr, for God 's callin' me to wipe away me tears an' sorrers and bind up me broken heart — so lave me to God and — my little Maggie — "

Very softly Ravenslee followed Mrs. Trapes out of the room, but they had not reached the front door when they heard a glad cry and thereafter a woman's sudden desolate sobbing.

"Go on, Mr. Geoffrey," whispered Mrs. Trapes. "But I guess I 'd better stay here a bit."

"You mean —?"

"As poor Martin 's sure found his little girl again!"

CHAPTER XXV

HOW SPIKE MADE A CHOICE AND A PROMISE

MONDAY morning found Ravenslee knocking at the opposite door, which opening, disclosed Spike, but a very chastened and humble Spike, who blushed and drooped his head and shuffled with his feet and finally stammered:

"Hello, Geoff — I — I 'm all alone, but you — you can come in if — if you care to?"

"I dropped in on my way down just to have a word with you, Spike."

With dragging feet Spike led the way into the sitting room, where lay his breakfast, scarcely tasted.

"Sit down, Geoff, I — I want to apologise," said the lad, toying nervously with his teaspoon. "I guess you think I 'm a mean, low-down sort o' guy, an' you 're right, only I — I feel worse 'n you think. An' say, Geoff, if I — if I said anything th' other night, I want you to — forget it, will you?"

"Why, of course, Spike."

"Hermy 's forgiven me. I — I 've promised to work hard an' do what she wants."

"I 'm glad of that, Spike!"

"She came creepin' into my room this mornin' before she went, but — me thinkin' she meant to give me a last call down — I pretended t' be asleep, so she just sighed an' went creepin' out again an' wrote me this," and Spike drew a sheet of crumpled note paper from his pocket and handed it to Ravenslee, who read these words:

BOY DEAR, I love you so much that if you destroyed my love, I think you would destroy me too. Now I must leave you to go to my work, but you will go to yours, won't

you — for my sake and for your sake and because I love you so. Be good and strong and clean, and if you want some one to help you, go to your friend, Mr. Geoffrey. Good-by, dear — and remember your promise.

Ravenslee passed back the pencilled scrawl and Spike, bending his head low, read it through again.

"I guess I 've just got t' be good," he murmured, "for her sake. Oh, Geoff," he cried suddenly, "I 'd die for her!"

"Better live for her, Spike, and be the honourable, clean man she wishes."

"She sure thinks you 're some man, Geoff! I guess she 's — kind o' — fond of you."

"That 's what I 've come to talk about, Spike."

"Are you — fond of her, Geoff?"

"Fond!" exclaimed Ravenslee, forgetting to drawl, "I 'm so fond — I love her so much — I honour her so deeply that I want her for my wife."

"Wife?" exclaimed Spike, starting to his feet, his eyes suddenly radiant, "d' ye mean you 'll marry her?"

"If she will honour me so far, Spike."

"Marry her! You 'll marry her!" Spike repeated.

"As soon as she 'll let me!"

"Geoff — oh, Geoff," exclaimed the boy, and choking, turned away.

"Won't you congratulate me?"

"I can't yet," gasped Spike; "I can't till I 've told ye what a mean guy I 've been."

"What about?"

"About you — an' Hermy. Bud said you meant t' make her go the way — little Maggie Finlay went, an' — oh, Geoff, I — I kind of believed him."

"Did you, Spike — that foul beast? But you don't believe it any longer, and M'Ginnis is — only M'Ginnis, after all."

"But I — I 've got to tell you more," said the lad miserably, as meeting Ravenslee's eye with an effort, he went

on feverishly. "The other night after—after Bud slipped me the — the stuff an' I 'd had a — a drink or two, he began askin' all about you. At first I blocked and sidestepped all his questions, but he kep' on at me, an' at last I — I give you away, Geoff — " Here Spike paused breathlessly and cast an apprehensive glance toward his hearer, but finding him silent and serene as ever he repeated:

"I — gave you away, Geoff!"

"Did you, Spike?"

"Yes, I — I told him who you really are!"

"Did you, Spike?"

"Yes! Yes! Oh, Geoff, don't you understand?"

"I understand."

"Well, why don't ye say something? Why don't ye tell me what I am? Say I 'm a dirty sneak — call me a yeller cur — anything!"

"No, you were drunk, that 's all; and when the drink is in, honour, and all that makes a man, is out — you were only drunk."

"Oh, but I was n't s' drunk as all that," gasped Spike, cowering in his chair, "but he kep' on comin' at me with his questions, an' at last — when I told him how I met up with you — he kind o' give a jump — an' his face — " Spike clenched his fists and, slowly raising them, pressed them upon his eyes. "I 'll never forget th' look on — his face! So now you know as I 've blown th' game on ye — given ye away — you as was my friend!" With the word Spike sobbed and fell grovelling on his knees. "Curse me, Geoff!" he cried. "Oh, curse me, an' tell me what I am!"

"You are Hermione's brother!"

"My God!" wailed the boy. "If she knew, she 'd hate me."

"I — almost think she would, Spike."

"You won't tell her, Geoff, you won't never let her know?"

"I — don't get drunk, Spike."

"But you won't tell her?" he pleaded, reaching out desperate hands, "you won't?"

"Not a word, Spike!"

"Oh, I know I 'm — rotten!" sobbed the lad. "I know you ain't got no use for me any more, but I 'm sorry, Geoff, I 'm real sorry. I know a guy can't forgive a guy as gives a guy away if that guy 's a guy's friend. I know as you can't forgive me. I know as you 'll cut me out for good after this. But I want ye t' know as I 'm sorry, Geoff — awful sorry — I — I ain't fit t' be anybody's friend, I guess."

"I think you need a friend more than ever, Spike!"

"Geoff!" cried the boy breathlessly. "Say — what d' you mean?"

"I mean the time has come for you to choose between M'Ginnis and me. If I am to be your friend, M'Ginnis must be your enemy from now on — wait! If you want my friendship, no more secrets; tell me just how M'Ginnis got you into his power — how he got you to break into my house."

Spike glanced up through his tears, glanced down, choked upon a sob, and burst into breathless narrative.

"There was me an' Bud an' a guy they call Heine — we 'd been to a rube boxin' match up th' river. An' as we come along, Heine says: 'If I was in th' second-story-lay there 's millionaire Ravenslee's wigwam waitin' t' be cracked,' an' he pointed out your swell place among th' trees in th' moonlight. Then Bud says: 'You ain't got th' nerve, Heine. Why, th' Kid 's got more nerve than you,' he says, pattin' my shoulder. An' Heine laughs an' says I 'm only a kid. An' Geoff, I 'd got two or three drinks into me an' th' end was I agreed t' just show 'em as I had nerve enough t' get in through a winder an' cop something — anything I could get. So Bud hands me his 'lectric torch, an' we skin over th' fence an' up to th' house — an' Heine has th' winder open in a jiffy, an' me — bein' half-soused an' foolish — hikes inter th' room, an' you cops me on th' jump an' — an' that 's all!"

"And M'Ginnis has threatened to send you up for it now and then, eh?"

"Only for a joke. Bud ain't like me; he'd never split on a pal — Bud would n't gimme away —"

"Anyway, Spike, it 's him or me. Which will you have for a friend?"

"Oh, Geoff, I — I guess I 'd follow you t' Kingdom Come if you 'd let me. I do want t' live straight an' clean — honest t' God I do, Geoff, an' if you 'll only forgive —"

Spike's outstretched, pleading hands were caught and held, and he was lifted to his feet.

"My Arthur-Spike, art going to the office this morning?"

"Sure I am; my eye ain't — ain't s' bad, after all, is it? Anyway, I feel more like what a man should feel like now, an' — Gee! look at me doin' the sissy tear-spoutin' act! Oh, hell — lemme go an' wash me face. 'N' say, if — if any o' them — I mean those dolly office boys has anything t' say, I 'll punch th' sawdust out o' them!"

CHAPTER XXVI

WHICH MAKES FURTHER MENTION OF A RING

Ravenslee, strolling in leisurely fashion along Tenth Avenue, became aware of a slender, pallid youth whose old-young face was familiar; a cigarette dangled from his pale, thin lips, and his slender hands were hidden in the pockets of his smartly tailored coat. On went Ravenslee, pausing now and then to glance idly into some shop window until, chancing to slip his fingers into a waistcoat pocket, he paused all at once and, drawing thence a ring wrought into the semblance of two clasped hands, drew it upon his finger. Now as he glanced at the ring, his eye gleamed and, smiling as one who has a sudden bright idea, he set off faster than before, striding on light and purposeful feet. But, as he turned a corner, he noticed that the pallid youth was still close behind, wherefore he halted before a shop window where, among other articles of diet, were cans of tomatoes neatly piled into a pyramid. At these he stared, waiting, and presently found the pallid youth at his elbow, who also stared upon the tomato pyramid with half-closed eyes and with smouldering cigarette pendent from thin-lipped mouth. And after they had stared awhile in silence, cheek by jowl, Ravenslee spoke in his pleasant, lazy voice:

"Judging by the labels these tomatoes are everything tomatoes possibly could be."

"'S right!" murmured the pale one imperturbably.

"Fond of tomatoes?" enquired Ravenslee.

"Aw!" answered his neighbour, "quit foolin'— talk sense!"

"Certainly! Why do you follow me, Soapy?"

Soapy's eyes grew narrower, and the pendent cigarette stirred slightly.

"Know me, hey?" he enquired.

"Heaven forbid! 'T was a bolt at a venture — a shot in the dark."

"Talkin' — o' — shootin'," said Soapy, grimly deliberate, "peanuts ain't a healthy profesh around here — not fer your kind, it ain't!"

"Oh, I don't know," answered Ravenslee, shaking his head gently at the tomatoes. "I 've heard of professions even more unhealthy."

"Aw — well — say what?"

"Well, talking of shooting — yours!"

Soapy's narrow eyes gleamed with an added viciousness, his pale nostrils expanded, but the retort died upon his curling mouth, his puffy eyelids widened and widened as he stared at the ring on Ravenslee's finger, and when he spoke his voice was strangely hoarse and eager.

"Say, sport — where 'd you — get that — ring?"

"Why do you ask?"

"'Cause I want to know, I guess."

"Think you 've seen it before?"

"Sport, I don't think — I know. I seen it many a time. I 'd know it in a million, sure."

"Where did you see it before?"

"On M'Ginnis's mitt. It useter belong t' Bud."

"Ah!" exclaimed Ravenslee, scowling down at the ring, "you make me wish more than ever that I had throttled him a little harder."

"Where 'd you get that ring, sport?" Soapy repeated.

"From Maggie Finlay's father!"

Soapy turned away to stare at the tomato cans again.

"Meanin'?" he enquired at last, hoarser than before.

"That once upon a time it belonged to — her."

"Sport," said Soapy after an interval, still staring at the pyramid of cans, "I useter know her once, an' I 've jest nacherally took a fancy t' that ring; if fifty dollars 'll buy it, they 're yours — right now."

"It is n't mine," answered Ravenslee, still scowling at the ring which he had drawn from his finger. "I 'm on my way to take it to — its owner. But if that person does n't want it, and I 'm pretty sure — that person — won't, you shall have it, I promise you. And now," said he, pocketing the ring and turning, still scowling, on Soapy, "you are one of M'Ginnis's gang, I fancy; anyway, if you see him you can tell him from me that if he gives me another chance I 'll surely kill him for the foul beast he is."

"Sport," said Soapy, "I guess the Spider 's right about you — anyway, you ain't my meat. An' as fer killin' Bud — you sure ain't goin' t' get th' chance — not while I have the say-so. S' long, sport!" and turning upon his heel, Soapy lounged away.

At Times Square Ravenslee entered the subway and, buying his ticket, was jostled by a boy, a freckled boy, round-headed and round of nose, who stared at him with a pair of round, impertinent eyes.

Lost in happy speculation he was duly borne to One Hundred and Thirtieth Street, where he boarded the ferry. Upon the boat he was again conscious of a round head that bobbed here and there amid the throng of passengers, but paid small heed as he leaned to watch the broad and noble river and the green New Jersey shore. At Fort Lee, exchanging boat for trolley car, he was once more vaguely conscious of two round eyes that watched him from a rear seat; but as the powerful car whirled them up-hill, plunged them down steep inclines, swung them around sharp curves, through shady woods, past far-flung boughs whose leaves stirred and whispered as the great car fleeted by, he fell again to dreaming of Hermione and the future; and so reached Englewood, a small township dreaming in the fierce midday sunshine. Here he enquired of a perspiring butcher in shirtsleeves the whereabouts of the house he wanted and, being fully directed and carefully admonished how to get there, set off along the road. And remembering that her feet must

often have traversed this very path, he straightway fell to his dreaming again. Thus how should he know anything of the round head that bobbed out from behind bush or tree ere it followed whither he went? So Ravenslee came where the road led between tall trees — to smooth green lawns beyond which was the gleam of water and so at last to the house he sought.

Now beside this house, separated by a wide stretch of lawn, was a small wood and, lured by its grateful shade, he turned aside into this wood and began pushing his way through the dense undergrowth, which presently thinned to form a small clearing, roofed and shut in by leaves and full of a tender green light. Here he paused, and espying a fallen tree hard by, sat himself down and began to fill his pipe. And now, remembering his shabby person, he felt disinclined to go up to the house and demand to see Miss Chesterton. Yet see her he would — but how? He was frowning over this problem when it was resolved for him quite unexpectedly; roused by the sound of a snapping twig, he glanced up — and Hermione was before him. She was coming down a narrow path that wound amid the leaves, and because she wore no hat, the sunlight, filtering through the branches, made a glory of her hair as she passed. Her head was bowed, and she walked very slowly as one in thought; she had brought sewing with her, but for once her busy hands were idle, and, as he looked upon her beauty, scarce breathing, he saw again that look of wistful sadness.

As he rose, she glanced up, and seeing him, stood utterly still. Thus for a long moment they gazed upon each other, then, even as he hastened to her, she came to him on swift, light feet, and, flushing, tremulous, quick-breathing, gave herself into his arms.

"Oh, Hermione, my beloved!" he murmured, his voice tense and eager, "did n't I say enough, last time? Don't you know I love you — worship you — hunger and yearn for you? I want you with every breath I draw. When will you be my wife — oh, when will you marry me, Hermione?"

For answer she reached up her arms, sudden, passionate arms that clung about him close and strong; so they stood thus, heart beating to heart, thrilling at each other's nearness yet drawing ever closer until, lifting her head, she gave her lips to his.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," she whispered, "is it right to love you so, I wonder? I never thought it could be — like this. It frightens me sometimes, because my love is so great and strong and I — so powerless. Is it right? I — Oh!" she broke off breathlessly, "how can I speak if — if you — "

"Kiss you so much?" he ended, "you can't speak, so — don't speak, my Hermione!" But now, all at once, he started and glanced up among the leaves above them.

"Dear," she whispered, "what is it?"

"That tapping sound," he answered, still gazing upward.

"It 's only the woodpecker."

"Why, of course!" he laughed. "It 's strange, but I dreamed a scene like this — yes, the great tree yonder, and you in my arms — though it seemed so impossible then, and — "

But uttering a sudden, low cry of alarm, Hermione broke from his clasp and fled from him along the leafy path while he stared after her, lost in amazement; then he ran also and caught her upon the edge of the little wood.

"What frightened you, Hermione — who was it?"

"I — I thought I saw some one crouching behind a bush — watching us!"

"Not — M'Ginnis?" he demanded, fierce-eyed.

"No — no, I 'm sure it was n't!"

"I 'll go and look," said Ravenslee, clenching his fists. But now, as he turned away, two round arms were about him again, soft and compelling, and she was looking up at him, all shy-eyed, passionate tenderness; and before the revelation in that look, he forgot all else in the world.

"Hermione — when will you marry me?"

Now, softened by distance, there floated to them the mellow booming of a gong.

"That means I must go!" she sighed.

"Hermione — when will you marry me?"

"Good-by — good-by — I must run!"

But his long arms only clasped her the closer.

"Hermione, when will you be my wife?"

"Oh, please, please let me go; if I 'm late — "

"When, Hermione?"

"When I — come home, if — you really — want me — Oh, now my hair 's all coming down, I know. Good-by!"

Reluctantly he loosed her and stood to watch until, reaching the verandah of the house, she paused to glance back to where he stood among the leaves ere she vanished between the screen doors. Then Ravenslee turned, and remembering her sudden fright, looked sharply about him, even pausing, now and then, to peer behind bush and thicket; but this time he did not think to glance upward, and thus failed to see the round eyes that watched him from amid the leaves of the great tree.

So he came again to the dusty highway and strode along, throbbing with life and the lust of life, revelling in the glory of earth and sky and quite unconscious of the small, furtive figure that flitted after him far behind.

And it was not until he sat in the ferryboat that he remembered he had forgotten to give her the ring, after all.

CHAPTER XXVII

MRS. TRAPES UPON THE MILLENNIUM

Mulligan's was in a ferment. Bare-armed women talked in every doorway; they talked from open windows, they talked leaning over banisters, they congregated on landings and in passageways — but everywhere they talked; while men and youths newly returned from work, lunch-can and basket in hand, listened in wide-eyed astonishment, shook incredulous heads, puffed thoughtfully at pipes or cigarettes, and questioned in guttural wonderment.

But Ravenslee, lost in his own happy thoughts, sped up the stairs all unheeding, abstractedly returning such neighbourly salutes as he happened to notice; reaching his lofty habitation in due course he let himself in, and was in the act of filling his pipe when Mrs. Trapes appeared. In one hand she grasped a meat skewer and in the other an open testament, and it was to be noted that her bright eyes, usually so keen and steady, roved here and there, from pink rug to green and yellow tablecloth, thence to the parrot-owl, and at last to her lodger. Finally she spoke.

"Mr. Geoffrey, are ye saved?" she demanded in awe-struck tones.

"Why, really, Mrs. Trapes, I —"

"Because, Mr. Geoffrey, this day it behooveth us all t' think of our souls an' th' hereafter, I reckon."

"Souls?" said Ravenslee, staring in his turn.

"Fire," she continued, shaking portentous head, "fire I 'm prepared for; a earthquake I could endoor; battle, murder, and sudden death I could abide; poverty is me

lot, Mr. Geoffrey, an' hardship is me portion, an' for all sich am I dooly prepared, sich things bein' nacheral; but fer this — well, there!"

"What is the matter, Mrs. Trapes?"

"Matter, Mr. Geoffrey? Well, the millenyum 's at hand, that 's all — the lion is about t' lay down with th' lamb, tigers has lost their taste fer blood, an' snakes an' serpints has shed their vennymous fangs! Mr. Geoffrey — the day is at hand — beware!"

"What in the world — " began Ravenslee, but Mrs. Trapes stayed him with uplifted skewer, and drew from the mysterious recesses of her apron a folded circular which she proceeded to spread open and from which she read in a hollow voice as follows:

NOTICE

August 1, 1910.

On and after the above date, all tenants soever residing within the tenement house known as Mulligan's are warned that all rents will be reduced by fifty per cent.

By Order.

"Now what," said Mrs. Trapes, refolding the circular very reverently and shutting it into the testament, "jest what d' ye think o' that?"

"Quite a — er — remarkable document, Mrs. Trapes!"

"Remarkable?" snorted Mrs. Trapes.

"Yes," said Ravenslee, beginning to fill his pipe, "extraordinary, most extraordinary — er — very much so — "

"Extraordinary? Mr. Geoffrey, is that all you got t' say about it?" And Mrs. Trapes sniffed loudly.

"Well, what more should I say?"

"Why, ain't it th' wonder o' th' whole round world? Ain't it th' merrycle of all time?"

"Certainly! Not a doubt of it!" he agreed. "By the way, what do you happen to have for supper? You see I 've been — "

"Supper?"

"I 'm quite hungry—I 'm always hungry lately and—"

"Hungry!" ejaculated Mrs. Trapes, rolling her eyes, "here I tell him of wonders an' omens beyond pore humming understandin', an' — he 's hungry! Lord, ain't that jest like a man! A man's soul, if a man has a soul, lays in his stummick. Hungry! But you shall be fed — prompt, Mr. Geoffrey. How 'll b'iled salmon an' peas soot?"

"Splendidly! And I think —"

"'On and after,'" said Mrs. Trapes, slowly and dreamily, "'on and after the above date, all tenants soever residin' — I 've learned it by heart, Mr. Geoffrey. Then it goes on to say, 'within the tennyment house known as Mulligan's are warned' — hum! I wonder why 'warned'? — 'are warned that all rents will be re-dooced by fifty per cent!' Fifty per cent!" she repeated in a dreamy rapture, "which is jest half, y' see. An', Mr. Geoffrey, that 's jest what 's got me plumb scared — it 's all so unnacheral. I 've heard o' rents bein' rose — constant, but who ever heard of 'em bein' took down before? Well, well! My land! Well, well!"

With which remark Mrs. Trapes went about her household duties, leaving Ravenslee to lounge and smoke and dream blissfully of Hermione.

"Y' see," said Mrs. Trapes, wandering in with a plate, "it 'll make things s' much easier for all of us; we shall begin t' feel almost rich — some of us. 'Are warned that all rents will be re-dooced by fifty per cent.' Well, well!" and she wandered out again.

But presently she was back once more, this time with the tablecloth, which she proceeded to spread, though still lost in dreamy abstraction.

"At first I could n't an' I would n't believe it, Mr. Geoffrey — no, sir!" she continued in the same rapt voice. "But every one 's got a notice same as mine, so I guess it must be true — don't ye think?"

"Not a doubt of it!" answered Ravenslee.

"But th' burnin' question as I asks myself is — who? It 's signed 'By Order', y' see, well — whose? One sure thing, it ain't Mulligan."

"But he owns the place, does n't he?"

"He did, Mr. Geoffrey, an' that 's what worries me — continual. What I demands is — who now?"

"Echo, Mrs. Trapes, methinks doth answer 'Who?' By the way, it was — er — salmon and green peas I think you —"

"My land, that bit o' salmon 'll bile itself t' rags!" and incontinent she vanished.

However, in due time Ravenslee sat down to as tasty a supper as might be and did ample justice to it, while Mrs. Trapes once more read aloud for his edification from the wondrous circular, and was again propounding the vexed and burning question of "who" when she was interrupted by a knocking without, and going to the door, presently returned with little Mrs. Bowker, in whose tired eyes shone an unusual light, and whose faded voice held a strange note of gladness.

"Good evenin', Mr. Geoffrey!" said she, bobbing him a curtsey as he rose to greet her, "my Hazel sends you her love an' a kiss for them last candies — an' thank ye for all th' medicine — but oh, Mr. Geoffrey, an' you, Ann Trapes, you 'll never guess what 's brought me. I 've come t' wish ye good-by, we 're — oh, Ann, we 're goin' at last!"

"Goin'!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes, clutching at her elbows, "y' never mean as you 're leavin' Mulligan's now the rent 's been took down — re-dooced fifty per cent. — by order?"

"That 's just what I 'm tellin' ye — oh, Ann, ain't it just — heavenly!"

"Heavenly!" repeated Mrs. Trapes, and sank into a chair.

"Yes, heavenly t' see th' trees an' flowers again — t' live among them, Ann."

"Samanthy Bowker — what do you mean?"

"Why, Ann, my Tom 's had a gardener's job offered

him at a gentleman's mansion in the country. Tom went after it t'day — an' got it. Fifteen dollars a week an' a cottage — free, Ann! Hazel 's just crazy with joy — an' so 'm I!"

Mrs. Trapes fanned herself feebly with her apron.

"All I can say is," said she faintly, "if the world don't come to an end soon — I shall. A gardener's job! A cottage in th' country! Why, that 's what you 've been hungerin' for, you an' Bowker, ever since I 've known ye. And to-day — it 's come! An' to-day the rent 's re-dooced itself fifty per cent. by order — oh, dear land o' my fathers! When d' ye go?"

"T'morrow mornin', Ann. Hazel 'll sure grow a strong, well girl in th' country — doctor said so last week — you heard him, Mr. Geoffrey, did n't you?"

"I did, Mrs. Bowker."

"And my Tom 's that excited he could n't eat no supper — oh, an' have ye seen in t'night's paper, Ann, about Mulligan's?"

"No — what now?" enquired Mrs. Trapes, as though on the verge of collapsing.

"Well, read that — right there!" and unfolding an evening paper, Mrs. Bowker pointed to a paragraph tucked away into a corner, and, drawing a deep breath, Mrs. Trapes read aloud as follows:

It is understood that Geoffrey Ravenslee, the well-known sportsman and millionaire, winner of last year's International Automobile race and holder of the world's long-distance speed record, has lately paid a record price in a real estate deal. A certain tenement building off Tenth Avenue has been purchased by him, the cost of which, it is rumoured, was fabulous.

"Fab'lous!" repeated Mrs. Trapes, and sniffed. "Well, I never had no use fer millionaires, anyway — they 're generally fools or rogues — this one 's a fool sure — any one is as would give much fer a place like Mulli-

gan's — an' yet, come t' think of it again — 'are warned as all rents will be re-dooced fifty per cent. by order' — yes, come t' think of it again, what I say is — God bless this millionaire, an' whatever he is, Ann Angelina Trapes is sure goin' t' mention him before th' Throne this night."

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHICH SHOULD HAVE RELATED DETAILS OF A WEDDING

"It 's all very, very wonderful, Ann, dear! But then — everything is so wonderful — just lately!"

"Meanin' what, Hermy?"

Hermione was darning one of Spike's much-mended socks, while Mrs. Trapes sat drinking tea. "Meanin' jest what is wonderful, my dear, and — since when?" she persisted.

"Oh — everything, Ann!"

"Yes, you said everything before. S'pose you tell me jest the one thing as you find so wonderful? An' — why an' wherefore that blush?"

"Oh, Ann — Ann, dear!" Down went sock and needle and, falling on her knees, Hermione clasped her arms about Mrs. Trapes and hid her glowing face in her lap. "Ann, dear, I 'm so happy!" she sighed — her speech a little muffled by reason of the voluminous folds of Mrs. Trapes's snowy apron.

"Happy?" said Mrs. Trapes, setting down her teacup to fondle and stroke that shapely head, "sich happiness ain't all because of the rent bein' re-dooced, by order, I reckon — is it?"

"Dear Ann," said Hermione, her face still hidden, "can't you guess?"

"No, my dear," answered Mrs. Trapes, her harsh tones wonderfully soft, "I don't have to — I guessed days ago. D' ye love him, Hermy?"

"Love him!" repeated Hermione, and said no more, nor did she lift her bowed head, but feeling the quick, strong pressure of those soft, embracing arms, the quiver of that

girlish body, Mrs. Trapes smiled, and stooping, kissed Hermione's shining hair.

"When did he speak, my dear?"

"Last Monday, Ann."

"Did he say — much?"

"He asked me to — marry him."

"Spoke of marriage, eh? Did he happen t' mention th' word — wife?"

"Oh, many times, Ann."

"Good f'r him! An' when 's it t' be?"

"Oh, Ann, dear, I — I 'm afraid it 's — to-night!"

"T'night? My land, he 's sure some hasty!"

"And so — so masterful, Ann!"

"Well, y' sure need a master. But t'night — land sakes!"

"He wrote and told me he would fix things so he could marry me to-night, Ann!"

"Then he 's sure out fixin' 'em right now. Lord, Hermy, why d' ye tremble, girl — y' sure love him, don't ye?"

"So much, Ann, so very much — and yet —"

"You ain't scared of him, are ye?"

"No — and yet, I — I think I am — a little."

"But you 'll marry him, all the same?"

"Yes."

"An' t'night?"

"Yes. But Ann, dear, when he comes in I want you to keep him with you as long as you can — will you?"

"Why, sure I 'll keep him, jest as long as — he 'll let me! Lord, t' think as my little Hermy 'll be a married woman this night!"

"And — oh, Ann, I have n't any — trousseau —"

"Shucks! You don't need none. You 're best as you are. You won't need no fluffs an' frills, I reckon."

"But, Ann dear," said Hermione, lifting her head and shaking it ruefully, "I have — nothing! And my best dress — I made it in such a hurry, you remember — it needs pressing and —"

"He ain't marryin' you fer your clo'es, Hermy — no, sir! It 's you he wants an' — oh, shucks! What do clo'es matter t' you, anyway? You was meant to be one o' them nymphs an' goddesses as went about clad — well, airy. You 'd ha' done fine with them soft arms an' shoulders an' — "

"But I 'm not a goddess, Ann, I 'm only poor Hermy Chesterton — with a hole in one stocking and the lace on her petticoat torn, and her other things — well, look here!" and up whirled gown and petticoat, "see what a state they 're in — look, Ann!"

"My dear, I am!" nodded Mrs. Trapes over her teacup, "an' what I say is, it don't matter a row o' pins if a stockin' 's got a bit of a hole in it if that stockin' 's on sich a leg as that! An' as fer — "

"But," sighed Hermione, "don't you understand — "

"My dear, I do! I was a married woman once, mind. An' I tell you 'beauty doth lie in the eye o' the beholder', my dear, an' the two eyes as is a-goin' t' behold you this night is goin' t' behold so much beauty as they won't behold nothin' else."

"But — he loves dainty things, I 'm sure."

"Well, ain't he gettin' a dainty thing? Ain't he gettin' th' daintiest, sweetest, loveliest — " Here Mrs. Trapes set down her cup again to clasp Hermione in her arms.

"Do you think he 'll — understand, Ann?"

"He 'll be a fool if he does n't!"

"And make allowances? He knows how poor we are and how busy I have to be."

"He does so, my dear. But, if it 's goin' t' comfort you any, there 's that corset cover you made me last Christmas. I ain't never wore it; I ain't dared to with all them trimmin's an' lace insertion, an' me s' bony here an' there. You can have it an' willin', my dear, an' then there 's them — "

"Ann, you dear thing, as if I would!"

"Why not? That corset cover 's a dream! An' then there 's them — "

"Dear, I could n't — I would n't! No, I 'll go to him just as I am — he shall marry me just like I am — "

"An' that 's a goddess!" nodded Mrs. Trapes, "yes, a young goddess — only, with more clo'es on, o' course. I 'm glad as he 's quit peanuts; peanut men don't kind o' jibe in with goddesses."

"Ann," said Hermione, sitting back on her heels, "I think of him a great deal, of course, and — just lately — I 've begun to wonder — "

"My dear," said Mrs. Trapes, blowing her tea, "so do I! I been wonderin' ever since he walked into my flat, cool as I don't know what, an', my dear, when I sets me mind t' wonderment, conclusions arrive — constant! I 'll tell ye what I think. First, he ain't s' poor as he seems — he wears silk socks, my dear. Second, he 's been nurtured tender — he cleans them white teeth night an' morn. Third, he ain't done no toil-an'-spinnin' act — take heed t' his hands, my dear. He 's soft-spoke but he 's masterful. He 's young, but he 's seen a lot. He ain't easy t' rile, but when he is — my land! He don't say a lot, an' he don't seem t' do much, an' yet — he don't seem t' starve none. Result — he may be anything!"

"Anything? Ann, dear!"

"Anything!" repeated Mrs. Trapes. "An' havin' studied him good an' heeded him careful, I now conclood he 's jest the thing you need, my dear."

"Then you like him, Ann — you trust him?"

"I sure do."

"Oh, you dear — dear — dear thing!" And once again Mrs. Trapes was clasped in those vigorous young arms and kissed with every "dear."

"Though, mind you," said Mrs. Trapes, pushing cup and saucer out of harm's way, "though, mind you, he 's a mystery I ain't found out — yet. D' ye s'pose he made any money out o' them blessed peanuts — not him! Mrs. Smalley, as lives down along 'Leventh, she told me as she 's seen him givin' 'em away by the bagful t' all the children down her way — repeated!"

"How sweet of him!" said Hermione, her red mouth all tender curves.

"Yes, but how did he live? How does he? How will he?"

"I don't know, dear; I only know I would trust him always — always!" And sitting back, chin in hand, Hermione fell again to happy thought.

"When he give up the nuts," pursued Mrs. Trapes, draining the teapot and sighing, "he tells me some fool tale of makin' a deal in real estate, an' I — ha, real estate!" Mrs. Trapes put down the teapot with a jerk. "A deal in real estate!" she repeated, and thereafter fell to such unintelligible mutterings as "Record price! Fab'lous! No, it could n't be! An' yet — silk socks! 'On an' after above date all tenants soever residin' — will be re-dooced by fifty per cent!'" Suddenly Mrs. Trapes sat bolt upright. "My land!" she ejaculated, "oh, dear land o' my fathers — if sech could be!"

"Why, Ann," exclaimed Hermione, roused from her reverie, "whatever is the matter?"

"My dear," said Mrs. Trapes, laying gentle hand on Hermione's blooming cheek, "nothin' — nothin' 't all! I 'm jest goin' over in my mind sich small matters as silk socks an' toothbrushes, that 's all."

"But you do mean something — you always do."

"Well — if I do this time, my dear, I 'm crazy — but the Bowkers have gone, mind that! An' him s' fond o' little Hazel!" Here Mrs. Trapes nodded almost triumphantly.

"The Bowkers? Why, yes — I 've been wondering — "

"I guess you know he went t' O'Rourke's an' give that M'Ginnis the thrashin' of his dirty life?" said Mrs. Trapes rather hastily. "Nigh killed the loafer, Spider Connolly told me."

"He 's so strong," said Hermione softly, her eyes shining. "But, Ann, what did you mean about — about toothbrushes and socks?"

"Mean? Why, socks an' toothbrushes, o' course. An'

my land! here 's me guzzlin' tea, an' over in my kitchen th' finest shin o' beef you ever saw a-b'ilin' f'r his supper. But now the question as burns is, if a married man this night, will he be here t' eat? An' if him — then you? An' if man an' wife suppin' in my parlour — where will ye sleep? "

" I — oh, Ann — I don't know. His letter just said that when I came home it would be our — wedding night! "

" Why, then it sure will be. An' f'r a weddin' supper, y' could n't have nothin' better 'n shin o' beef. I 'll go an' watch over that stoo with care unfailin', my dear; believe me, that stoo 's goin' t' be a stoo as is a stoo! What, half after five? Land sakes, how time flies! "

CHAPTER XXIX

IN WHICH HERMIONE MAKES A FATEFUL DECISION

When Mrs. Trapes was gone, Hermione stood a long time to look at herself in her little mirror, viewing and examining each feature of her lovely, intent face more earnestly than she had ever done before; and sometimes she smiled, and sometimes she frowned, and all her thought was:

"Shall I make him happy, I wonder? Can I be all he wants — all he thinks I am?"

So, after some while, she combed and brushed out her glorious hair, shyly glad because of its length and splendour; and, having crowned her shapely head with it, viewed the effect with cold, hypercritical eyes.

"Can I, oh, can I ever be all he wants — all he thinks I am?"

And then she proceeded to dress; the holey stockings were replaced by others that had seen less service; the worn frills and laces were changed for others less threadbare. This done, Hermione, with many supple twists, wriggled dexterously into her best dress, pausing now and then to sigh mournfully and grieve over its many deficiencies and shortcomings, defects which only feminine eyes, so coldly critical, might hope to behold.

Scarcely was all this accomplished when she heard a soft knock at the outer door, and at the sound her heart leapt; she flushed and paled and stood a moment striving to stay the quick, heavy throbbing within her bosom; then breathlessly she hastened along the passage and, opening the door with trembling hands, beheld Bud M'Ginnis. While she stared, dumb and amazed, he entered and, closing the door, leaned his broad back against it.

"Goin' away, Hermy?" he enquired softly, looking her over with his slow gaze.

"Yes."

"Goin' far, Hermy?"

"I don't know."

"Goin' — alone, Hermy?"

"Why are you here? What do you want?"

"T' save ye from — hell!" he answered, his voice rising loud and harsh on the last word. "Oh, I know," he went on fiercely, "I know why you 're all dolled up in your best. I know as you mean t' go away to-night with — him. But you ain't goin', girl — you ain't."

"To-night," she said gently, "is my wedding night."

M'Ginnis lifted a hand and wrenched at the silken neckerchief he wore as though it choked him.

"No!" he cried, "you ain't a-goin' t' get no wedding, Hermy; he don't mean t' give ye a square deal. He 's foolin' ye — foolin' ye, girl! Oh," said he through shut teeth, "ye thought I was safe out o' the way, I guess. You ought t' known better; th' p'lice could n't hold me, they never will. Anyway, I 've kept tabs on ye — I know as you 've been meeting him — in a wood! I know," here M'Ginnis seemed to choke again, "I know of you an' him — kissin' an' cuddlin' — oh, I 've kept tabs on ye — "

"Yes," she said gently, "I saw your spy at work."

"But y' can't deny it. Y' don't deny it! Say, what kind o' girl are you?"

"The kind that does n't fear men like you."

"But y' can't deny meetin' him," he repeated, his hoarse voice quivering; "you don't deny — kissin' him — in a wood! Only deny it, Hermy, only say you did n't, an' I 'll choke th' life out of any guy as says you did — only deny it, Hermy."

"But I don't want to deny it. If your spy had ears he can tell you that we are going to be married. Now go."

Once more M'Ginnis reached up to his throat and wrenched off the neckerchief altogether.

"Married!" he cried, "an' t' him! He 's foolin' ye,

Hermy, by God he is! Girl, I 'm tellin' ye straight an' true — he 'll never marry ye. His kind don't marry Tenth Av'ner girls — Nooport an' Fifth Av'ner 's a good ways from Hell's Kitchen an' Tenth Av'ner, an' they can't ever come t'gether, I reckon."

"Ah!" sighed she, falling back a step, "what do you mean?"

"Why, I mean," said M'Ginnis, twisting the neckerchief in his powerful hands much as if it had been the neck of some enemy, "I mean as this guy as comes here bluffin' about bein' down an' out, this guy as plays at sellin' peanuts is — Geoffrey Ravenslee, the millionaire."

"But — he is — Arthur's friend!"

"Friend — nothin'!" said he, wringing and wrenching at the neckerchief, "I guess you ain't found out how th' Kid an' him came t' meet, eh? Well, I 'll tell ye — listen! Your brother broke in to this millionaire's swell house — through the winder — an' this millionaire caught him."

"Oh," said she, smiling in bitter scorn, "what a clumsy liar you are, Bud M'Ginnis!"

"No," he cried eagerly, "no, I ain't tellin' ye no lies; it 's God's own truth I 'm givin' ye."

"No, you 're just a liar, Bud M'Ginnis!" and she would have turned from him, but his savage grip stayed her.

"A liar, am I?" he cried. "Why, then, you 're sister to a crook, see! Your brother 's a thief! a crook! You ain't got much t' be s' proud over — "

"Let me go!"

"Listen! Your brother got into this guy's house t' steal, and this millionaire guy caught him — in the act! An' havin' nothin' better t' do, he makes young Spike bring him down here — just t' see th' kind o' folks as lives in Hell's Kitchen, see? Then he meets you — you look kind o' good t' him, so he says t' th' Kid, 'Look here,' he says, 'you help me game along with y'r sister, an' we 'll call it quits — '"

Breaking from his hold, Hermione entered the little

parlour, and sinking down beside the table, crouched there, hiding her face, while M'Ginnis, leaning in the doorway, watched her, his strong hands twisting and wrenching at the neckerchief.

"Ah, leave me now!" she pleaded, "you 've done enough, so — go now — go!"

"Oh, I 'll go. I come here t' put ye wise — an' I have! You 're on to it all now, I guess. Nooport and Fifth Av'ner 's a good ways from Hell's Kitchen and Tenth Av'ner, an' they can't never come together. I guess there 's sure some difference between this swell guy with all his millions an' a Tenth Av'ner girl as is a — thief's sister — "

Slowly Hermione lifted her head and looked up at him, and M'Ginnis saw that in her face which struck him mute; the neckerchief fell from his nerveless fingers and lay there all unheeded.

"Hermione," he muttered, "I — girl, are ye — sick?"

"Go!" she whispered, "go!"

And turning about, M'Ginnis stumbled out of the place and left her alone. For a long time she sat there, motionless and crouched above the table, staring blindly before her, and in her eyes an agony beyond tears, heedless of the flight of time, conscious only of a pain sharper than flesh can know. Suddenly a key was thrust in the lock of the outer door, footsteps sounded along the passage accompanied by a merry whistling, and Spike appeared.

"Hello, Hermy, ain't tea ready yet?" he enquired, tossing aside his straw hat and opening a newspaper he carried, "say, the Giants are sure playin' great ball this season — what, are ye asleep?"

"No, dear!"

"Why, Hermy," he exclaimed, dropping the paper and clasping an arm about her, "Oh, Hermy — what is it?"

"Oh, boy — dear, dear boy — you did n't, did you?" she cried feverishly. "You are a little wild — sometimes, dear, just a little — but you are good — and honourable, are n't you?"

"Why, yes, Hermy I — I try t' be," he answered uneasily; "but I don't know what you mean."

"You 're not a thief, are you? You 're not a burglar? You never broke into any one's house. I know you did n't, but — tell me you did n't — tell me you did n't!"

"No — no, o' course not," stammered Spike and, averting his head, tried to draw away, but she clung to him all the closer.

"Boy — boy dear," she whispered breathlessly, "oh, boy, look at me!"

But seeing he kept his face still turned from her, she set a hand to his cheek and very gently forced him to meet her look. For a long moment she gazed thus — saw how his eyes quailed, saw how his cheek blanched, and as he cowered away, she rose slowly to her feet, and into her look came a growing horror; beholding which Spike covered his face and shrank away from her.

"Oh, boy —" her voice had sunk to a whisper now, "oh, boy — say you did n't!"

"Hermy — I — can't —"

"Can't?"

"It 's — it 's all — true. Yes, I did! Oh, Hermy, forgive me."

"Tell me!"

"Oh, forgive me, Hermy, forgive me!" he cried, reaching out and trying to catch her hand. "Yes, I 'll tell ye. I — I got in — through th' winder, an' Geoff caught me. But he let me go again — he said he 'd never tell nobody if — ah, don't look at me like that!"

"If — what?"

"If I 'd bring him back here with me — Hermy, don't! Your eyes hurt me — don't look at me that way."

"So it — is — all — true!"

"Oh, forgive me, forgive me!" he pleaded, throwing himself on his knees before her and writhing in the anguish of remorse. "They doped me, Hermy, I — did n't know what I was doin' — they did n't give me no time t' think. Oh, forgive me, Hermy; Geoff forgave me, an' you must

— oh, God, you must, Hermy!" Again he sought to reach her hand, but now it was she who shrank away.

"I loved you so — I — loved — you so!" she said dully.

"Hermy," he cried, catching hold of her dress, "forgive me — just this once, for God's sake! I ain't got nobody in the world but you — forgive me!" And now his pleading was broken by fierce sobs, and he sought to hide his tear-stained face in the folds of her dress, but she drew it quickly from him, shrinking away almost as if she feared him.

"A thief!" she whispered, "oh, God — my brother a thief! I don't seem — able to — think. Go away — go away, I — must be — alone!"

"Hermy, dear, I swear — oh, I swear I 'll — "

"Go away!"

"Oh, Hermy, I did n't think you 'd ever — turn away — from me."

"Go away!"

"Oh, Hermy — won't you listen?"

"I can't! Not now. Go away."

Sobbing, the boy got to his feet, and taking his hat, crossed slow-footed to the door; there he paused to look back at her, but her staring eyes gazed through him and, turning hopelessly away, he brushed his sleeve across his cheek and, treading slow and heavily along the passage, was gone.

Dry-eyed she stood awhile, then sank again beside the table and crouched there with face bowed between outstretched arms, and hands tight clenched. Evening began to fall, but still she sat huddled there, motionless, and uttering no sound, and still her eyes were tearless. At last she stirred, conscious of a quick, firm step near by, and, thrilling to that sound, rose and stood with her back to the fading light as Ravenslee entered.

"Dear," said he, tender and eager, "I found the door open — did you leave it for me? Why, Hermione — oh, my love, what is it?" and he would have caught her to

him, but she held him away and questioned him, quick-breathing:

"You are — Geoffrey Ravenslee — the millionaire — are n't you?"

"Why — er — I — I 'm afraid I am," he stammered. "I 'm sorry you found it out so soon, dearest; I wanted to tell you after we — "

"Oh, why did n't you tell me before — why did n't you? No — please wait! You — you caught my — brother, did n't you?" she went on breathlessly; "he had broken in — was burgling your house, was n't he — was n't he?"

"How in the world," began Ravenslee, flinching, "who told — "

"He broke into your house to — steal, did n't he — did n't he?"

"But, good heavens — that was all forgotten and done with long ago! They 'd made the poor chap drunk — he did n't know what he was doing — it 's all forgotten long ago! Dear heart, why are you so pale? God, Hermione — nothing can alter our love!"

"No, nothing can alter our love," she repeated in the same dull tones. "Oh, no, nothing can ever alter that; even though you deceived me I shall always love you, I can't help it. And just because I do love you so, and because I am a thief's sister, I — oh, I can never be your wife — I could n't, could I?"

"By God, Hermione, but you shall!" As he spoke he caught her in his arms, passionate arms that drew and held her close. Very still and unresisting she lay in his embrace, uttering no word; and stooping, he kissed her fiercely — her lips, her eyes, her white throat, her hair, and, silent still, she yielded herself to his caresses.

"You are mine, Hermione, mine always and forever! You are the one woman I long for — the wife nature intended for me! You are mine, Hermione!"

Very softly she answered, her eyes closed:

"I felt at the first there was a gulf dividing us — and

now — this gulf is wider — so wide it can never be crossed by either of us. Your world is not my world, after all — you are Geoffrey Ravenslee and I am only — what I am. Newport and Fifth Avenue are a long way from Hell's Kitchen and Tenth Avenue, and they can never — never come together. And I — am a thief's sister, so please, please loose me — oh, have mercy and — let me go."

His arms fell from her and, shivering, she sank beside the table, and the pale agony of her face smote him.

"But you love me, Hermione?" he pleaded.

"If I had only known," she sighed, "I might not have learned to love you — quite so much! If I had only known!" Her voice was soft and low, her blue eyes wide and tearless, and because of this, he trembled.

"Hermione," said he gently, "all this week I have been planning for you and Arthur. I have been dreaming of our life together, yours and mine, a life so big, so wonderful, so full of happiness that I trembled, sometimes, dreading it was only a dream. Dear, the gates of our paradise are open; will you shut me out? Must I go back to my loneliness?"

"I shall be lonely, too!" she murmured brokenly. "But better, oh, far better loneliness than that some day —" she paused, her lips quivering.

"Some day, Hermione?"

"You should find that you had married not only a scrubwoman but — the sister of a — thief!" Suddenly she sprang to her feet, her clinging arms held him to her bosom and, drawing down his head, she pressed her mouth to his; holding him thus, she spoke, her voice low and quick and passionate:

"Oh, my love, my love! I do love you with every thought, with every part of me — so much, so very much that my heart is breaking, I think. But, dearest, my love is such that I would be everything fair and beautiful for you, everything proud and good and noble for you if I could. But I am only Hermy Chesterton, a Tenth Avenue girl, and — my brother — So I 'm going to send you

away, back to your own world, back to your own kind because — because I do love you so! Ah, God, never doubt my love, but — you must go — "

"Never, Hermione, never!"

"You must! You will, I know, because your love is a big, generous love — because you are chivalrous and strong and gentle — because I beg and implore you if you have any pity for me — go — "

"But why? — Why?"

"Oh, must I tell you that — can't you understand?"

"Why must I go, Hermione?"

"Because," she murmured, her yearning arms close about him, her face close hidden against his breast, "because I 'll never — marry you — now — but I love you — love you so much that I 'm afraid — ah, not of you. So, I must be alone — quite alone — to fight my battle. And now — now that I 've shown you all my heart, told you all my weakness, you 'll go for my sake — just for my sake — won't you?"

"Yes — I 'll — go!" he answered slowly.

"Away from here — to-night?"

"Yes," he answered hoarsely, "yes!"

Then Hermione fell suddenly before him on her knees, and, before he could stay her, had caught his hands, kissing them, wetting them with her tears, and pressing them passionately to her bosom.

"I knew," she cried, "I knew that you were strong and gentle and — good. Good-by — oh, my love — good-by!"

"Hermione," said he, kissing her bowed head, "oh, my Hermione, I love you with a love that will die only when I do. I want you, and I 'll never lose hope of winning you — some day, never give up my determination to marry you — never, so help me God!"

Then swiftly he turned away but, reaching the door, stooped and picked up M'Ginnis's neckerchief and, recognising it, crumpled it in fierce hand; so, with it clenched in griping fingers, he hurried away and left her there upon her knees.

CHAPTER XXX

HOW GEOFFREY RAVENSLEE DEPARTED FROM HELL'S KITCHEN

"WHAT, back again already, Mr. Geoffrey?" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes, poking her head around the kitchen door, as Ravenslee entered the flat, "back so soon?"

"Only for a minute, Mrs. Trapes."

"Supper 'll be ready soon — your wedding supper, eh, Mr. Geoffrey? You 'll have it here with me, you an' Hermy, o' course! Smells kind o' good, don't it?"

"Delicious, Mrs. Trapes!"

"Delicious is the word, Mr. Geoffrey — stooed beef with carrots —"

"And onions, Mrs. Trapes — onions, I 'm sure?"

"Well, I 'll not deny a onion here an' there, Mr. Geoffrey — a stoo needs 'em."

"Ah, I knew it!" sighed Ravenslee. "I grieve that I shan't be able to eat it."

"Not eat — what, you? Say, y' ain't sick, are you?"

"Not in body, Mrs. Trapes."

"Then why no stoo?"

"Because I shan't be here. I 'm going, Mrs. Trapes — I 'm leaving Mulligan's now — for good —"

"Leavin' — y' mean with Hermy?"

"No — alone. Good-by, Mrs. Trapes!"

"My land!" gasped Mrs. Trapes, "what you tellin' me?"

"Good-by, Mrs. Trapes!"

"But why? Oh, dear Lord, what is it? Who —"

"I want to thank you — for all your kindness. Good-by!"

As one in a dream Mrs. Trapes extended a limp hand and stood wide of eye and pale of cheek to watch him go; and as he descended the stairs, her look of helpless, pained surprise went with him. Swiftly he strode across that familiar court, shoulders squared, chin outthrust, and eyes that glowed ominously in his pale face beneath fierce-scowling brows. As he turned into Tenth Avenue there met him the Spider.

"What you chasin' this time, bo?" he enquired.

"M'Ginnis."

"Then you 're sure chasin' trouble."

"That 's what I want. D' you know where he is?"

"Sure I do, but — "

The Spider paused, drawing in his breath slowly, as with experienced gaze he viewed Ravenslee's pale, set face — the delicate nostrils wide and quivering, the relentless mouth and burning eyes and all the repressed ferocity of him and, drawing back a step, the Spider shook his head.

"Bo," said he, "that 's jest what I ain't goin' t' tell ye."

"Very well, I must find him."

"Don't!" said the Spider, walking on beside him, "if I did n't think a whole lot o' ye, I 'd lead ye t' him."

"Oh — I shall find him, if it takes me all night."

"An' if ye do, it 'll be murder, I 'm dead sure — "

"Murder?" said Ravenslee with a flash of white teeth. "Well, I shall certainly kill him — this time!"

"Is it th' Kid again?"

"No — oh, no, it 's just for my own satisfaction — and pleasure."

"You ain't heeled, are ye? This ain't goin' t' be no gun-play — eh?"

"No, I have n't a gun, but I 've brought his — neckerchief."

"Sufferin' Pete!" murmured the Spider in a strangely awed voice, and walked on in silence, chewing viciously.

"Bo," said he at last, "I 'm thinkin' th' kindest thing I could do would be t' slip one over t' your point while

you was n't lookin', an' puttin' you t' sleep a bit — you want soothin'! Bud 'll be too big fer you or any other guy t' tackle now; ye see, his stock 's rose — th' Noo Jersey p'lice was n't strong enough t' hold him — "

"That 's where I 'm different — I can!" said Ravenslee, opening and shutting his right hand convulsively. "Yes, I 'll hold him till his last kick — and after!"

"My God!" exclaimed the Spider softly, and, beholding that clutching right hand, he edged away.

"Where you goin' t' look fer him?" he enquired after a while.

"O'Rourke's!"

"Why not try Raynor's first?" and he nodded to a saloon on the adjacent corner.

"Because I 'm not a fool."

"Bo, I ain't s' sure o' that! O'Rourke's 'll be full o' tough guys t'night; all th' bunch 'll be there, an' if Bud tips 'em th' say-so, they 'll snuff your light out quicker 'n winkin'."

"That would n't be such a hardship."

"Oh, so that 's it, hey? You got a kiss-me-an'-let-me-die sort o' feelin', hey? Some nice bit o' stuff been turnin' ye down, bo?"

"That 'll be about enough!" said Ravenslee, quick and fierce; and, meeting the flash of his eye, the Spider edged away again.

"Sufferin' Mike!" said he, "you sure ain't doin' the affable chat stunt t'night!"

But Ravenslee strode along in silence, and the Spider, heeding the pale, set ferocity of his expression, grew troubled.

"Say," said he at last, "this don't happen t' be th' night as you 've fixed up t' smash th' gang, does it?"

"No — only M'Ginnis."

"S'posin' he ain't at O'Rourke's?"

"He 'll be somewhere else."

"Bo, if I was your ma, I should be prayin' you don't find Bud, yes, sir! An' I should pray — dam' hard!"

By this time they had reached Eleventh Avenue and were close upon the saloon when Ravenslee halted suddenly, for, beneath a lamp on the opposite sidewalk, he saw M'Ginnis in talk with two other men.

Drawing the neckerchief from his pocket, Ravenslee crossed over and tapped M'Ginnis on the arm, who, turning about, stared into a pallid face within a foot of his own.

"What th' hell —" he began, but Ravenslee cut him short.

"You left this behind you," said he, thrusting forward the neckerchief, "so I 've brought it to twist around that foul throat of yours. Now, M'Ginnis — fight!"

Thrusting the neckerchief into his pocket, Ravenslee clenched his fists, and, saying no more, they closed and fought — not as men, but rather as brute beasts eager to maim and rend.

M'Ginnis's companions, dumbfounded by the sudden ferocity of it all, stood awhile inactive, staring at those two forms that lurched and swayed, that strove and panted, grimly speechless. Then, closing in, they waited an opportunity to smite down M'Ginnis's foe from behind. But the Spider was watching, and, before either of them could kick or strike, his fists thudded home — twice — hard blows aimed with scientific precision; after which, having dragged the fallen away from those fierce-trampling feet, he stood, quivering and tense, to watch that desperate encounter.

Once Ravenslee staggered back from a vicious flush-hit, and once M'Ginnis spun around to fall upon hands and knees; then they clenched, and coming to the ground together, fought there, rolling to and fro and hideously twisted together. But slowly Ravenslee's clean living began to tell, and M'Ginnis, wriggling beneath a merciless grip, uttered inarticulate cries and groaned aloud. And now the deadly neckerchief was about his gasping throat and in his ears his conqueror's fierce laugh — lost all at once in a roar of voices, a rush of trampling feet.

Wrenched at by fierce hands, smitten by unseen fists, Ravenslee was beaten down — was dimly aware of the Spider's long legs bestriding him, and staggering up through a tempest of blows, hurled himself among his crowding assailants, felled one with his right, stopped another with his left, and, as the press broke to the mad fury of his onslaught, felt his hand wrenched from a man's windpipe and heard a frantic voice that panted:

"Leg it, bo, leg it. Hully Chee! ain't ye had enough?" So, mechanically, he set off at a run, with his arm still gripped by the Spider. "Leg it, bo — leg it good, or here 's where we snuff it sure! This way — round th' corner; only keep goin', bo, keep goin'."

Very fleetly they ran with their pursuers close on their heels, across open lots, over fences, along tortuous alleys, until the rush and patter of the many feet died away, and the Spider, pulling up at the corner of a dismal, narrow street hard by the river, stood awhile to listen.

"Jiminy Christmas! but you 're some hot stuff at the swattin' business — you 're a glutton, you are, bo. I been in one or two scraps meself, but I never seen a guy so hungry for — "

"Where are we?"

"Thirteenth an' Twentieth."

"Are we safe?"

"F' th' time, I reckon. But all Hell's Kitchen 'll be out after us t'night, sure. So I guess it 's us for th' immediate hike — "

"Us? Will they be after you, too?"

"Well," said the Spider, smiling down grimly at his damaged knuckles, "I guess yes! Hell's Kitchen an' Tenth Av'ner 's got t' get along without me from now on, I reckon. They ain't losin' much, an' I ain't leavin' much, but — "

"Why the devil had you got to follow me to-night?" demanded Ravenslee, scowling.

"Bo," said the Spider as they went on again, "there 's times when my likin' f'r you gets a pain; there 's times

when y'r talk gives me th' earache, an' y'r lovin' looks the willies. I ain't lookin' f'r no gratitood, nor yet a gold dinner-set an' loominated address, but, not ownin' a hide like a sole-leather Saratoga, I 'll jest get on me way — S' long!"

"Where are you going?"

"I dunno, but — I 'm goin' there, right now."

But as the Spider turned away, his hand was caught and gripped, and Ravenslee was smiling; his features looked a bit battered, but his smile was pleasant as ever.

"Forgive my cursed temper, Spider. I owe you my life again and — I ought to be grateful, I suppose. Forgive me, I 'm — not quite myself to-night."

"Sure thing!" said the Spider, returning his grasp, "but, bo, I 'm kind o' wonderin' in me little mind what Bud 's feelin' like! You sure swatted him good an' heavy. I never seen cleaner footwork, an' them left jabs o' yours — "

"The question is, how do you feel, Spider, and what are you going to do?"

The pugilist scratched his rough chin. "Well, that 's what gets my goat; I dunno quite, bo. Y' see, I shan't be able t' get no more fights here in the East now, not wi' Bud 'n' his old man against me — y' see, Bud's old man 's about the biggest — "

"I wonder if you 'd care to come with me?"

"Whaffor?"

"Well, for one thing, I need another chauffeur and — "

"A— what?" The Spider halted under a lamp-post to stare at Ravenslee a little anxiously. "Say, now, take a holt of ye'self an' jest put that one over th' plate again — you need a — what?"

"Another chauffeur."

"Another shuvver — another? Bo, y' did n't happen t' get a soak on th' bean just now, did ye?"

"No."

"Well, then, I guess you 're some shook up; what you want 's food, right now!"

"Why, yes, now you mention it, I 'm devilish hungry," agreed Ravenslee.

"Leave it t' me, bo — I know a chewin'-joint close by — soup, joint, sweets, an' coffee an' only a quarter a throw — some feed, bo! Shin right along, I 'll — "

"No, you shall come home and dine with me."

"Home?" repeated the Spider, halting to stare again; "you 're sure talkin' ramblin' — "

"We can discuss the chauffeur's job then — "

"Shuvver?" said the Spider uneasily. "But what 's a guy like you want with a shuvver?"

"Well, to drive my car — and — "

"Car?" said the Spider, his uneasiness growing, "got a car now, have ye, bo?"

"I rather think I 've got six."

"Sufferin' Sam!" The Spider scratched his chin while his keen eyes roved over Ravenslee's exterior apprehensively. "Say, bo, you quite sure none o' th' bunch booted you on th' dome — eh?"

"Quite sure."

"An' yet you got six auter-mobiles. I say — you think so."

"Now I think again, they 're seven with the newest racer."

"Say, now, jest holt still a minute! Now, swaller twice, think dam' hard, an' tell me again! You got how many?"

"Seven!"

"Got anythin' else?"

"Oh, yes, a few things."

"Tell us jest one."

"Well, a yacht."

"Oh, a yacht?"

"A yacht."

"'S 'nuff, bo, 's 'nuff! But go on — go on, get it all off if you 'll feel better after. Anythin' more?"

"Why, yes, about twenty or thirty houses and castles and palaces and things — "

"That settles it sure!" sighed the Spider. "You 're

comin' t' see a doctor, that 's what! Your dome 's sure got bent in with a boot or somethin'."

"No, Spider, I just happen to be born the son of a millionaire, that 's all."

"Think o' that, now!" nodded the Spider, "a millionaire now — how nice! An' what do they call ye at home?"

"Geoffrey Ravenslee."

"How much?" exclaimed the Spider, falling back a step. "The guy as went ten rounds with Dick Dunoon at th' 'National?' The guy as won th' Auter-mobile Race? Th' guy as bought up Mulligan's — you?"

"Why, yes. By the way, I sat in the front row and watched you lick Larry McKinnon at 'Frisco; I was afraid you were going to recognise me, once or twice."

"Then, you — you *have* got a yacht, th' big one as lays off Twenty-third Street?"

"Also seven cars; that 's why I want you for a chauffeur."

"Ho-ly Gee!" murmured the dazed Spider. "Well, say, you sure have got me goin'! A millionaire! A peanut cart! A yacht! Well, say, I — I guess it 's time I got on me way. S' long!"

"No you don't, my Spider; you 're coming home with me."

"What — me? Not much I ain't — no, sir! I ain't no giddy gink t' go dinin' with millionaires in open-faced clo'es — not me!"

"But you 're coming to have dinner with that same peanut man who learned to respect you because you were a real, white man, Spider Connolly. And that 's another reason why I want you for my chauffeur."

"But — say, I — I can't shuv."

"Joe shall teach you."

"Joe? Y' mean — Joe Madden?"

"He 'll be chauffeur number one — and there 's a cross-town car! Come on, Spider! Now — in with you!"

CHAPTER XXXI

IN WHICH SOAPY TAKES A HAND

O'Rourke's was full: its long bar, shaped something like the letter J, supported many lounging arms and elbows; its burnished foot-rail was scraped by boots of many shapes and sizes; its heavy air, thick with cigarette smoke, hummed with many voices. In one corner, a remote corner where few ventured to penetrate, Soapy leaned, as pallid and noncommittal as ever, while Spike poured out to him the story of his woes.

"She drove me out, Soapy! She drove me away from her!" he repeated for the hundredth time. The boy was unnaturally flushed and bright of eye, and his voice was as shaky as the hand which fidgeted with his whisky glass; and the sense of his wrongs was great and growing greater with every sip.

"She told me t' leave her! She drove me away from her —"

"So you come here, eh, Kid?" drawled Soapy, pendent cigarette smouldering. "You skinned over here t' Bud f' comfort, an' you 'll sure get it, Kid — in a glass!"

"Bud 's always good t' me —"

"'S right, Kid, 's right, Bud 's an angel sure, though he ain't got no wings yet. Oh, Bud 'll comfort ye — frequent, an' by an' by he 'll take ye back t' Hermy good an' soused; you can get your own back that ways — eh, Kid? It 'll sure make her sit up an' take notice when she sees ye come in reelin' an' staggerin' — eh, Kid? An' tomorrow you 'll be sick mebbe, an' she 'll have ter nurse ye — oh, Bud 'll fix things fer ye, I guess." Spike glowered and pushed his half-emptied glass further away.

"I ain't goin' home soused!" he muttered.

"No?" said Soapy, faintly surprised. "Bud 'll feel kind o' hurt, won't he?"

"I ain't goin' home soused — not for Bud nor nobody else!"

"Why, then, if I was you, Kid, I should beat it before Bud comes in."

"I guess I will," said Spike, rising.

But now was sudden uproar of voices in the street hard by, a running and trampling of feet, and, the swing doors opening, a group of men appeared, bearing among them a heavy burden; and coming to the quiet corner they laid M'Ginnis there. Battered, bloody, and torn he lay, his handsome features swollen and disfigured, his clothes dusty and dishevelled, while above him and around him men stooped and peered and whispered.

"Why, it 's — it 's — Bud!" stammered Spike, shrinking away from that inanimate form, "my God! It 's — Bud!"

"'S right, Kid!" nodded Soapy imperturbably, hands in pockets and, though his voice sounded listless as ever, his eyes gleamed evilly, and the dangling cigarette quivered and stirred.

"Ain't — dead, is he?" some one questioned.

"Dead — not much!" answered Soapy, "guess it 's goin' to take more 'n that t' make Bud a stiff 'un. Besides, Bud ain't goin' t' die that way, no, not — that way, I reckon. Dead? Watch this!" So saying, he reached Spike's half-emptied glass from the bar and, not troubling to stoop, poured the raw spirit down upon M'Ginnis's pale, blood-smirched face.

"Dead?" said Soapy. "Well, I guess not — look at him!"

And, sure enough, M'Ginnis stirred, groaned, opened swollen eyelids and, aided by some ready arm, sat up feebly. Then he glanced up at the ring of peering faces and down upon his rent and dusty person, and fell to a sudden, fierce torrent of curses; cursing thus, his strength seemed to return all at once, for he sprang to his feet

and with clenched fists drove through the crowd, and lifting a flap in the bar, opened a door beyond and was gone.

"No," said Soapy, shaking his head, "I guess Bud ain't dead — yet, fellers. I wonder who gave him that eye, Kid? An' his mouth too! Did ye pipe them split lips! Kind o' painful, I guess. An' a couple o' teeth knocked out too! Some punchin', Kid! An' Bud kind o' fancied them nice, white teeth of his a whole heap!"

Here the bartender glanced toward the corner where they stood, and, lifting an eyebrow, jerked his thumb at the door behind him with the words: "Kid, I reckon Bud wants ye."

For a moment Spike hesitated, then, lifting the mahogany flap, crossed the bar, and opened the door.

"Guess I 'll come along, Kid," and, hands in pockets, Soapy followed.

They found M'Ginnis sprawling at a table and scowling at the knuckles of his bruised right hand while at his elbow were a bottle and two glasses. He had washed the blood and dirt from him, had brushed and straightened his dusty garments, but he could n't hide the cuts and bruises that disfigured his face, nor his scratched and swollen throat.

"What you here for?" he demanded, as Soapy closed the door, "did n't send for you, did I?"

"No, that 's why I come, Bud."

"But, say, Bud, what — what 's been th' matter?" stammered Spike, his gaze upon M'Ginnis's battered face, "who 's been — "

"Matter? Nothin'! I had a bit of a rough-house as I come along — "

"'S right," nodded Soapy, "you sure look it! Never seen a fatter eye — "

"Well, what you got t' beef about?"

"Nothin', Bud, only — "

"Only what?"

"It 's kind o' tough you losin' them couple o' teeth — or is it three?"

M'Ginnis turned on him with a snarl. "A-r-r-, you —! Some day I 'm goin' t' kick the insides out o' ye!"

"Some day, Bud, sure. I 'll be waitin'! Meantime why not get some doctor-guy t' put ye face back in shape — gee, I hate t' see ye — you look like a butcher's shop! An' them split lips pains some, I guess!"

Here, while M'Ginnis choked in impotent rage, Soapy lit a fresh cigarette from the butt of the last and held out the packet.

"Try a coffin-nail, Bud? No? Well, I guess y' could n't smoke good with a mouth on ye like that."

"Who did it, Bud?" questioned Spike eagerly. "Who was it?"

"Hush up, Kid, hush up!" said Soapy, viewing M'Ginnis's cuts and bruises with glistening eyes. "I guess that guy 's layin' around somewheres waitin' f'r th' coroner — Bud would n't let him make such a holy mess of his face an' get away with it — not much! Bud 's a killer, I know that — don't I, Bud?"

"You close up that dog's head o' yours, Soapy, or by —"

"'S all right, Bud, 's all right. Don't get peeved; I 'll close up tighter 'n a clam, only — it 's kinder tough about them teeth —"

"Are ye goin' t' cut it out or shall —"

"Aw, calm down, Bud, calm down! Take a drink; it 'll do ye good." And filling a glass with rye whisky, Soapy set it before M'Ginnis, who cursed him, took it up, and turned to Spike.

"Fill it up, Kid," he commanded.

"Not me, Bud, I — I ain't here for that," said Spike. "I come t' tell ye as some dirty guy 's been an' blown th' game on me t' Hermy; she — she knows everything, an' to-night she — drove me away from her —"

"Did she, Kid, oh, did she?" said M'Ginnis, a new note of eagerness in his voice. "Drove ye out onto th' streets, Kid? That 's dam' hard on you!"

"Yes, Bud, I — guess she — don't want me around —"

"Kind o' looks that way!" nodded M'Ginnis, and filling Spike's glass, he put it into the boy's unwilling fingers. "Take a drink, Kid; ye sure need it!" said he.

"'S right," murmured Soapy, "told ye Bud 'ud comfort ye, did n't I, Kid?"

"So Hermy 's drove ye away?" said M'Ginnis, "throwed ye out — eh?"

"She sure has, Bud, an' I — Oh, I 'm miserable as hell!"

"Why, then, get some o' Bud's comfort into ye, Kid," murmured Soapy. "Lap it up good, Kid; there 's plenty more — in th' bottle!"

"Let him alone," growled M'Ginnis, "he don't want you buttin' in!"

"'S right, too, Bud!" nodded Soapy, "he 's got you, ain't he? An' you — got him, ain't you?"

"I did n't think Hermy 'ud ever treat me — like this!" said Spike tearfully.

"You mean — throwin' ye out into th' streets, Kid? Why, I been expectin' it!"

"Expectin' it?" repeated Spike, setting down his glass and staring, "why?"

"Well, she 's a girl, ain't she, an' they 're all th' same, I reckon —"

"An' Bud knows all about girls, Kid!" murmured Soapy. "Bud 's wise t' all their tricks — ain't you, Bud?"

"But whatcher mean?" cried Spike. "What ye mean about expectin' it?"

"Well, she don't want ye no more, does she?" answered M'Ginnis, his bruised hands fierce clenched, his voice hoarse and thick with passion. "She 's got some one else now — ain't she? She 's — in love — ain't she? She 's all waked up an' palpitatin' for — for that dam' —" he choked, and set one hand to his scratched throat.

"What d' ye mean, Bud?"

"Ah!" said Soapy, softer than before, "I 'm on, Bud; you put me wise! He means, Kid, as Hermy 's in love with

th' guy as has just been punchin' hell out of him — he means your pal Geoff." With a hoarse, strangling cry, M'Ginnis leapt up, his hand flashed behind him, and — he stood suddenly very still, staring into the muzzle of the weapon Soapy had levelled from his hip.

"Aw, quit it, Bud, quit it," he sighed, "it ain't come t' that — yet. Besides, the Kid 's here, so loose ye gun, Bud. No, give it t' me; you 're a bit on edge t'night, I guess, an' it might go off an' break a glass or somethin'. So gimme ye gun, Bud. That 's it! Now we can sit an' talk real sociable, can't we? Now listen, Bud — what you want is t' get your own back on this guy Geoff, an' what th' Kid wants is t' show his sister as he ain't a kid, an' what I want is t' give ye both a helpin' hand — "

But while M'Ginnis stood scowling at the imperturbable speaker, Spike rose, a little unsteadily, and turned to the door.

"I 'll be gettin' on me way, Bud," said he.

"Where to?"

"Home."

"What! Back t' Hermy? After she turned ye out?"

"But I — I got t' go somewheres — "

"Well, you stay right here with me, Kid; I 'll fix ye up all right — "

"'S right, Kid!" nodded Soapy. "Bud 'll fix ye all right, same as I said; we 'll have in another bottle when that 's empty!"

"What about your sister, Kid?" demanded M'Ginnis fiercely. "What about Hermy an' this swell guy? Are y' goin' t' sit around an' do nothin'?"

"But Geoff 's goin' t' marry her."

"Marry her! What, him? A millionaire marry your sister? You think so, an' she thinks so, but I know different!"

"But Hermy ain't that sort. Hermy 's — good — "

"Sure, but this guy 's got her fazed — she thinks he 's square all right — she 'll trust him an' then — s'posin' he ain't?"

"I — I ain't s'posin' nothin' like that!" said Spike, gulping his whisky.

"Well, s'posin' he 's been meetin' her — in a wood — on the sly — eh? S'posin' they been huggin' an' kissin' — "

"Say now — you cut that out — " stammered Spike, his voice thick. "I tell ye — she ain't — that kind."

"S'posin'," continued Bud, refilling the lad's glass, "s'posin' I could show 'em to ye in a wood — eh? Ah! What she want t' meet him in a wood for, anyway — nice an' quiet, eh?"

"Say now, Bud, I — I ain't goin' t' listen t' no more!" said Spike, rising and clutching at the table, "I — I 'm goin' home!" And swaying on unsteady feet, he turned to the door, but M'Ginnis gripped his shoulder.

"Wait a bit, Kid."

"N-no, I 'm — goin' home — see!" said Spike, setting his jaw obstinately, "I 'm goin' — r-right now!"

"That 's just what you ain't!" snarled M'Ginnis. "Sit down! Hermy 's only a work-girl — don't forget that, Kid — an' this guy 's a millionaire. I guess he thinks Hermy 'll do — till he gets tired of her an' — then what?"

"He — told me he 's goin' t' marry her!" said Spike slowly, speaking with an effort, "an' I guess Geoff ain't a liar. An' I wanter — go home."

"Home — after she throwed ye out? Ain't ye got no pride?"

"Aw, say, Bud," sighed Soapy, "I guess d' Kid ain't soused enough for pride yet; sling another glass int' him — that 'll fix him good, I reckon."

"I ain't g-goin' t' drink no more," said Spike, resting heavy head between his hands, "I guess I 'll b-beat it home, f'lers."

"Bud," suggested Soapy, "ain't it about time you rang in little Maggie on him?"

M'Ginnis whirled upon the speaker, snarling, but Soapy, having lighted another cigarette, nudged Spike with a sharp elbow.

"Kid," said he, "Bud 's goin' t' remind ye of little Maggie Finlay — you remember little Maggie as drowned herself." Spike lifted a pale face and stared from the placid Soapy to scowling Bud and shrank away.

"Yes," he whispered hoarsely, "yes — I 'll never forget how she looked — pale, so pale an' still, an' th' water — runnin' out of her brown curls — I — I 'll never forget — "

"Well," growled M'Ginnis, "watch out Hermy don't end th' same way."

"No!" cried Spike. "Oh, my God — no!"

"What 's she meetin' this millionaire in a wood for — on the sly?"

"She don't! Hermy ain't like that."

"I tell ye she does!" cried M'Ginnis, "an' him kissin' an' squeezin' her an' — nobody by — "

"It 's a lie, Bud — she — she would n't!"

"S'posin' I could show ye? S'pose you see him there — waitin' for her — "

"If — if he means any harm t' Hermy, I — I 'll kill him!"

"Aw — you would n't have the nerve, Kid!"

"I 'd shoot him dead — by God, I would!"

"You ain't man enough, Kid."

"You g-give me a gun an' see. I 'd shoot any one t' save my sister from — th' river. Oh, my God — I — I 'd die for her, an' she don't love me no more!" And leaning his head upon his arms, Spike burst into a passion of tears. M'Ginnis watched him awhile, then, filling the boy's glass, clapped him on the shoulder and held it to his lips.

"Neck this, Kid," said he, "neck it all — so, that 's good, ain't it? To-morrow evenin' I 'll take ye where they meet; maybe you 'll ketch him waitin' for her — but instead of Hermy an' kisses there 'll be you an' me, hey? Will ye come?"

"S-sure I will if — you 'll gimme — your gun."

"Pshaw, Kid — what 's a kid like you want with a gun?"

"T' shoot him — "

"Eh? What? D' ye mean —? "

"If he 's after my sister, I 'll — kill him! I will, by God, I will! "

"'S right," nodded Soapy, staring into the boy's drawn face, "'s right, Bud; if ever I see a killer — th' Kid 's sure it! "

Slowly the glare died out of Spike's eyes, his body drooped, and sighing, he pillowed his heavy head upon the table and fell into a drunken slumber. For a while the two men sat there hearkening to his stertorous breathing, then Soapy laughed soft and mirthlessly. "You sure got th' Kid all worked up an' mad enough t' — kill, eh, Bud? If he does get up against this guy Geoff — this guy Geoff 's sure goin' t' cash in — sudden. Consequently, I guess you 'll be wantin' paper an' pencil — both here! "

"What th' hell — " began M'Ginnis.

"Telegram, Bud. You 're goin' t' frame up a nice little telegram t' this guy Geoff — oh, you sure are th' fly gazebo! A nice little message — 'meet me t'morrow in the wood at sunset — Hermy? ' Somethin' nice 'n' romantic like that 'll bring him on th' run — eh, Bud? Then, 'stead of Hermy, comes you an' th' Kid, eh, Bud? An' 'stead of kisses, this guy Geoff gets a lead pill — eh, Bud? Th' Kid can't miss if you get him close enough. It sure is some scheme, Bud; I could n't have thought it out better myself. Paper 'n' pencil, Bud — get busy an' I 'll sashay over an' send it off for ye — t'night."

During Soapy's unusually long speech, M'Ginnis sat staring at him under frowning brows, but now he turned and scowled down at the sheet of paper, picked up the pencil, laid it by again and sat opening and shutting his big hands, while Soapy, lighting another cigarette, watched him furtively. When at last he spoke, his voice was thick, and he did n't lift his scowling gaze.

"Send that kid Larry t' me, an' say — you don't have t' come back."

"All right, Bud, all right — only you 'd best send two telegrams t' make sure — one t' Fift' Av, an' one t' his place up th' river. S' long, Buddy!"

Some fifteen minutes later, the boy Larry, stepping out of O'Rourke's, was swung to the wall in Soapy's grip.

"Aw — say, cheese it now! Is that you, Soapy?"

"'S right, my bucko. Fork out that telegram — quick!"

"Aw, say, what yer mean — 'n' say, Bud told me to hustle, 'n' say — "

"Dig it out — quick!" said Soapy, the dangling cigarette glowing fiercely. "I want it — see?"

"But say — " whimpered Larry, "what 'll Bud say — "

"Nothin'! Bud ain't goin' t' know. You take this instead — take it!" And Soapy thrust another folded paper into the boy's limp hand, who took it whimpering.

"Bud tol' me t' bring it back."

"Well, you tell him you lost it."

"Not much — I 'll skin right back an' tell him you pinched it."

"You won't, my sport, you won't!" said Soapy, and speaking, moved suddenly; and the boy, uttering a gasp of terror, shrank cowering with the muzzle of Soapy's deadly weapon against the pit of his stomach. "You ain't goin' t' say a word t' Bud nor nobody else, are ye, Larry boy, are ye?"

"No — no — "

"Because if ye ever did, old sport, I should give it ye there — right there in the tum-tum, see? Now chase off, an' see ye get them addresses right. S' long, Larry boy, be good now!" When the boy had scudded away, Soapy opened the paper and scanned the words of M'Ginnis's telegram and, being alone, smiled as he glanced through it.

"You got th' Kid, Bud," he murmured, "you got th' Kid — but if th' Kid gets the guy Geoff, why — I 've sure got you, Bud — got ye sure as hell, Bud!"

CHAPTER XXXII

OF HARMONY AND DISCORD

Mr. Brimberly, comfortably ensconced in Young R.'s favourite armchair, nodded ponderously and beat time to the twang of Mr. Jenkins's banjo, whereto Mr. Stevens sang in a high-pitched and rather shaky tenor the latest musical success yclept "Sammy." Thus, Mr. Jenkins strummed, Mr. Stevens trilled, and Mr. Brimberly alternately beat the tempo with a plump white finger and sipped his master's champagne until, having emptied his glass, he turned to the bottle on the table beside him, found that empty also, crossed to the two bottles on the mantel, found them likewise void and had tried the two upon the piano with no better success, when, the song being ended, Mr. Jenkins struck in with:

"All dead men, Brim! Six of 'em between us — not bad going, what?"

"And very good fizz too, on the whole!" added Mr. Stevens. "I always sing better on champagne. But come, Brim my boy, I 've obliged with everything I know, and Jenk, 'e 's played everything 'e knows, and I must say with great delicacy an' feelin' — now it 's your turn — sing somethin'."

"Well," answered Mr. Brimberly, squinting at an empty bottle, "I used to know a very good song once, called 'Let 's drownd all our sorrers and cares.' But good 'eavens! we can't drownd 'em in empty bottles, can we?"

"Oh, very good!" chuckled Mr. Jenkins, "oh, very prime! If I might suggest, there 's nothin' like port — port 's excellent tipple for drowndin' sorrer and downing care — what?"

"Port, sir?" repeated Mr. Brimberly, "we 'ave enough port in our cellars to drownd every sorrer an' care in Noo York City. I 'm proud of our port, sir, and I 'm reckoned a bit of a connysoor —"

"Ah, it takes a eddicated palate to appreciate good port!" nodded Mr. Jenkins loftily, "a eddicated palate — what?"

"Cert'nly!" added Mr. Stevens, "an' here 's two palates waitin', waitin' an' ready to appreciate till daylight doth appear."

"There 's nothin' like port!" sighed Mr. Brimberly, setting aside the empty champagne bottle, "nothin' like port, and there 's Young Har 'ardly can tell it from sherry — oh, the Goth! the Vandyle! All this good stuff would be layin' idle if it was n't for me! Young Har ain't got no right to be a millionaire; 'is money 's wasted on 'im — he neglects 'is opportoonities shameful — eh, shameful! What I say is — what 's the use of bein' a millionaire if you don't air your millions?"

Hereupon Mr. Jenkins rocked himself to and fro over his banjo in a polite ecstasy of mirth.

"Oh, by Jove!" he gasped, "if that ain't infernal clever, I 'll be shot! Oh, doocid clever I call it — what!"

"Er — by the way, Brim," said Mr. Stevens, his glance roving toward the open window, "where does he happen to be to-night?"

"Where?" repeated Mr. Brimberly, fingering a slightly agitated whisker, "where is Young Har, sir? Lord, Mr. Stevens, if you ask me that, I throws up my 'ands, and I answers you — 'eavens knows! Young Har is a unknown quantity, sir — a will o' the wisp, or as you might say, a ignus fattus. At this pre-cise moment 'e may be in Jerusalem or Jericho or — a-sittin' outside on the lawn — which Gawd forbid! But there, don't let 's talk of it. Come on down into the cellars, and we 'll bring up enough port to drownd sorrer an' care all night."

"With all my heart!" said Mr. Jenkins, laying aside his banjo.

"Ditto, indeed!" nodded Mr. Stevens, slipping a hand in his host's arm, and thus linked together they made their way out of the room.

Scarcely had their hilarious voices died away when a muscular brown hand parted the hangings of an open window, and Geoffrey Ravenslee climbed into the room. His rough clothes and shabby hat were powdered with dust, and he looked very much out of place amid his luxurious surroundings as he paused to glance swiftly from the bottles that decorated the carved mantel to those on table and piano. Then, light-treading, he crossed the room, and as the hilarious three were heard approaching, vanished in his turn.

"'Ere we are, Jubilee Port!" exclaimed Mr. Brimberly, setting down two cobwebbed bottles with elaborate care, "obleege me with the corkscrew, somebody."

"Won't forget as you promised us a song, Brim!" said Mr. Jenkins, passing the necessary implement.

"Oh, I won't disappoint ye," answered Mr. Brimberly, drawing the cork with a practised hand; "my father were a regular songster, a fair carollin' bird 'e were, sir."

"'Ow about 'Knocked 'em in the Old Kent Road'?" Mr. Stevens suggested.

"Sir!" exclaimed Mr. Brimberly, pausing in the act of filling the glasses, "that 's rather a — a low song, ain't it? What do you think, Mr. Jenkins?"

"Low?" answered Mr. Jenkins, "it 's as low as — as mud, sir. I might say it 's infernal vulgar — what?"

"Why, I don't care for it myself," Mr. Stevens admitted rather humbly, "it was merely a suggestion."

"With your good favour," said Mr. Brimberly, after a tentative sip at his glass, "I 'll sing you a old song as was a rare favourite of my father's."

"Why, then," said Mr. Jenkins, taking up his banjo, "oblige us with the key."

"The key, sir?" answered Mr. Brimberly, pulling down his waistcoat, "what key might you mean?"

"The key of the note dominant, Brim."

Mr. Brimberly stared and felt for his whisker.

"Note dominant," he murmured; "I don't think my song has anything of that sort — "

"Oh, well, just whistle a couple o' bars."

"Bars," said Mr. Brimberly, shaking his head, "bars, sir, is things wherewith I do not 'old; bars are the 'aunt of the 'umble 'erd, sir — "

"No, no, Brim," explained Mr. Stevens, "Jenk merely means you to 'um the air."

"Ah, to be sure, now I appre'end! I 'll 'um you the hair with pleasure."

Mr. Brimberly cleared his throat vigorously and thereafter emitted certain rumbling noises, whereat Mr. Jenkins cocked a knowing head.

"C sharp, I think?" he announced.

"Not much, Jenk!" said Mr. Stevens decidedly, "it was D flat — as flat a D as ever I heard!"

"It was C!" Mr. Jenkins said, "I appeal to Brim."

"Well," said Mr. Brimberly ponderously, "I 'm reether inclined to think I made it a D — if it was n't D it was F nat'ral. But if it 's all the same to you, I 'll accompany myself at the pianoforty."

"What," exclaimed Mr. Stevens, emptying and refilling his glass, seeing which Mr. Jenkins did the same, "what — do you play, Brim?"

"By hear, sir — only by hear," said Mr. Brimberly modestly, as, having placed bottle and glass upon the piano within convenient reach, he seated himself upon the stool, struck three or four stumbling chords and then, vamping an accompaniment a trifle monotonous as to bass, burst forth into song:

"It was a rich merchant that in London did dwell,
He had but one daughter, a beautiful gell,
Which her name it was Dinah, scarce sixteen years old,
She 'd a very large fortune in silver and gold."

Chorus:

"Ri tooral ri tooral ri tooral i-day,
Ri tooral ri tooral ri tooral i-day."

It was now that Mr. Ravenslee, his rough clothes replaced by immaculate attire, entered unostentatiously, and, wholly unobserved by the company, seated himself and lounged there while Mr. Brimberly sang blithely on:

"As Dinah was a-walking in her garden one day,
Her father came to her and thus he did say:
'Come wed yourself, Dinah, to your nearest of kin,
Or you shan't have the benefit of one single pin!'"

"Ri tooral ri too—"

Here Mr. Jenkins, chancing to catch sight of that unobtrusive figure, let fall his banjo with a clatter, whereupon Mr. Brimberly glancing around, stopped short in the middle of a note, and sat open-mouthed, staring at his master.

"Enjoying a musical evening, Brimberly?"

Mr. Brimberly blundered to his feet, choked, gasped, groped for his whiskers, and finally spoke:

"Why, sir, I — I 'm afraid I — we are — "

"I did n't know you were such an accomplished musician, Brimberly."

"Mu-musician, sir?" Brimberly stammered, his eyes goggling; "'ardly that, sir, oh, 'ardly that, I — I venture to — to tinkle a bit now an' then, sir — no offence I 'ope, sir?"

"Friends musical too, it seems."

"Y-yes, sir, music do affect 'em, sir — uncommonly, sir."

"Yes, makes them thirsty, does n't it?"

"Why, Mr. Ravenslee, sir, I — that is, we did so far venture to — er — I mean — oh, Lord!" and mopping perspiring brow, Mr. Brimberly groaned and goggled helplessly from Mr. Jenkins who stood fumbling with his banjo to Mr. Stevens who gaped fishlike.

"And now," said Young R., having viewed them each in turn, "if these — er — very thirsty musicians have had enough of — er — my wine to — er — drink, perhaps you 'll be so obliging as to see them — off the premises?"

"I — I beg parding, sir?"

"Please escort your friends off the premises."

"Certingly, sir — at once, sir —"

"Unless you think you ought to give them each a handful of my cigars —"

But Mr. Brimberly had already bundled his dazed guests to the door, out of the door, and out of the house, with very little ceremony.

It was a very deferential and officiously eager Brimberly who presently knocked and, bowing very frequently, begged to know how he might be of further service.

"Might I get you a little supper, sir? We 'ave 'am, sir, we 'ave beef, cold, salmon and cucumber likewise cold, a ditto chicken —"

"That sounds rather a quaint bird," said Ravenslee.

"Yes, sir, very good, sir, chicken an' a nice slice of 'am, sir, say, and —"

"Thank you, Brimberly, I dined late."

"Why then, sir, a sandwich or so, pray permit me, sir, cut nice an' thin, sir —"

"Thank you — no."

"Dear, dear! Why then, sir, whisky? Brandy? A lick-your?"

"Nothing."

"A cigar, sir?"

"Hum! Have we any of the Garcias left?"

"Y-yes, sir. Ho, certingly, sir. Shall I —"

"Don't bother, I prefer my pipe; only let me know when we get short, Brimberly, and we 'll order more — or perhaps you have a favourite brand?"

"Brand, sir," murmured Brimberly, "a — er — certingly, sir."

"Good night, Brimberly."

"Good night, sir, but first can't I do — hanything?"

"Oh, yes, you do me, of course. You do me so consistently and well that I really ought to raise your wages. I 'll think about it."

Mr. Brimberly stared, coughed, and fumbled for his

whisker, whence his hand wandered to his brow and hovered there.

"I — I bid you good night, sir!"

"Oh, by the way, bring me the letters."

"Certingly, sir!" and crossing the room, Mr. Brimberly returned, bearing a salver piled high with letters, which he set at his master's elbow; this done, he bowed and went from the room, one hand still at his dazed brow.

Left alone, Ravenslee took up the letters one by one. Some he threw aside, some few he opened and glanced at carelessly; among these last was a telegram, and the words he saw were these:

"Meet me to-morrow sunset in the wood all shall be explained Hermy."

For a while he sat staring at this, then, laying it by, drew out a letter case from which he took another telegram bearing precisely the same message. Having compared them, he thrust them into his pocket, and filling his pipe, sat awhile smoking and lost in thought. At last, his pipe being out, he rose, stretched, and turned toward the door, but in the act of leaving the room, paused to take out and compare the telegrams again and so stood with puckered brow.

"'Hermy!'" he said softly. "'Hermione' is so much prettier. 'All shall be explained.' A little trite, perhaps! Oh, well — " So saying, he folded up the telegrams, switched off the lights and went to bed.

CHAPTER XXXIII

OF TRAGEDY

It was close on the hour of sunset when Ravenslee stopped his car before a quiet hotel in Englewood and sprang out.

"Will you be long, sir?" enquired Joe, seating himself at the wheel and preparing to turn into the garage.

"Probably an hour, Joe."

"Very good, sir."

But as the big car turned, Ravenslee spoke over his shoulder.

"By the way, if I should n't be back in an hour, come and meet me." Then, having given Joe full and particular directions as to the little wood, he turned and went upon his way.

It had been a stifling day, and even now, though a soft air was abroad tempering the humid heat, when this light wind languished there was over all things a brooding stillness, foreboding storm. But Ravenslee strode on, unheeding dust and heat, hastening on to that which awaited him, full of strength and life and the zest of life, glad-hearted, and with pulses that throbbed in expectation. Thus, as the sun sank in fiery splendour, he reached the little wood. Evening was falling, and already, among the trees, shadows were deepening to twilight, but in the west was a flaming glory; and, upon the edge of the wood he turned to glance back at this radiance, splashes of gold and pink flushing to an ominous red. For a long moment he stood to stare around about the solitary countryside, joying in life and the glory of it. Then he turned, with a smile on his lips, and stepped into the gloom of the wood. On he went, forcing his way through the under-

brush until, reaching the clearing, he halted suddenly and faced about, fancying he had heard a rustle in the leaves hard by. Spike, cowering behind a bush with M'Ginnis's fingers gripping his arm, shivered and sweated and held his breath until Ravenslee moved on again, and, coming to a fallen tree, seated himself there and sat chin on fist, expectation in every tense line of him.

"Now!" whispered M'Ginnis hoarsely, "get him now — before Hermy comes t' him!" Shuddering, Spike levelled the weapon he held, but at that moment Ravenslee was filling his pipe, and something in this homely action checked the lad, paralysed finger on trigger, and shrinking, he cowered down upon the grass despite the fierce hand that gripped him. "Get him now, Kid — get him now! Aim f'r his chest — y' can't miss at this distance — "

"I — I can't, Bud!" gasped the boy, writhing, "I can't do it — I can't!" Dropping the revolver, he hid his face in sweating hands and shivered.

From somewhere near by a woodpecker was tapping busily, but save for this no sound broke the pervading stillness, for the gentle wind had died away. But suddenly the quiet was rent and shivered, and Spike, deafened by the report, glanced up to see Ravenslee rise to his feet, stagger forward blindly, then, with arms outflung, pitch forward upon his face and lie there.

"By God, you — you 've shot him, Bud!" he whimpered — "you — you 've killed dear old Geoff — oh, my God!"

"Aw, quit — quit all that!" whispered M'Ginnis breathlessly, "that 's what we came for, ain't it? What you lookin' at?"

"It lays so — still! so awful still!" Spike gasped.

"Well, what ye got t' go starin' at it that ways for? Come on — let 's beat it; it 's us for th' quick get-away in case any one heard. Come on, Kid!"

"But you 've — killed Geoff!"

"I guess he don't need no more — 'n' say, Kid, you 're

in on this job too, don't forget! Come on, it 's little old N' York for ours!"

Though M'Ginnis dragged at him, Spike huddled limply on his knees, his glaring eyes always staring in the one direction; whereupon M'Ginnis cursed and left him.

But all at once, finding himself alone, to horror came fear, and stumbling to his feet Spike began to draw away from that awful thing that held his gaze; slowly he retreated, always going backwards, and though he stumbled often against tree and sapling, yet so long as it was in sight needs must he walk backwards. When at last a kindly bush hid it from his sight, he turned and ran — ran until, panting and wild-eyed, he burst from the wood and was out upon the open road. Even then he paused to stare back into that leafy gloom but saw and heard nothing. Then, uttering a moan, he turned and ran sobbing along the darkening road.

But, within that place of shadows, from amid the leaves of a certain great tree, dropped one who came beside that motionless form, and knelt there awhile. When at last he rose, a ring lay upon his open palm — a ring in the shape of two hands clasping each other; then, with this clenched in a pallid fist, he also turned and left that still and awful thing with its face hidden in last year's dead and rotting leaves.

CHAPTER XXXIV

OF REMORSE

For three miserable days Spike had remained indoors, eating little, sleeping less, venturing abroad only at dusk to hurry back with the latest paper and, locked within his bedroom, to scan every scare head and column with eyes dilating in dreadful expectation of beholding the awful word — MURDER.

For three interminable days Hermione, going about her many duties slow of foot and listless, had scarcely heeded him, conscious only of her own pain, the agony of longing, the yearning ache that filled her, throbbing in every heart-beat — an ache that would not be satisfied. Thus, lost in her own new sorrow, she spoke seldom, sighed often, and sang not at all; often sitting at her sewing machine with hands strangely idle and gaze abstracted. Spike, watching furtively, had seen her eyes brim over with great, slow-falling tears; more than once he had heard her bitter weeping in the dawn. At such times he had yearned to comfort her, but between them was memory, dividing them like a wall — the memory of a still form with arms wide-tossed and face hidden among dead leaves. And at such times Spike writhed in the grip of horror and groaned under the gnawing fangs of remorse; sometimes he prayed wild, passionate prayers, and sometimes he wetted his pillow with unavailing tears, while in his ears, like a small voice, soft and insistent, repeated over and over again, was the dread word MURDER. By day it haunted him also; it stared up at him from the white cloth of the breakfast table, forbidding him to eat; he read it on floor and walls and ceiling; he saw it in bloody characters that

straggled across the very sky; wherever he turned his haggard gaze there he needs must read it.

And then — there were the footsteps. All day long they tramped up and down the stairs outside — everyday sounds that he had never heeded before, but now they were warnings to hearken to and shudder at, and he would sit pretending to read but with ears straining for the sound of feet upon the landing or on the stair. Now they were feet that crept — the stealthy steps of one that lurked to catch him unaware; or again, they were the loud tramp of those who came with authority to drag him to doom, and he would watch the door, staring wide-eyed, waiting for the thundering knock he expected yet which never came. All day long they haunted him, and at night, locked within his bedroom, he must needs lift heavy head from the pillow to hearken with ears straining even yet, until, haggard and worn, he had shivered and groaned and wept himself to sleep, only to awake and start up in sweating terror, thinking he heard a fierce hand knocking, knocking upon the outer door.

Thus, for three long days Spike had lived in torment, and to-night, as he leaned throbbing head between clutching hands, his haggard eyes sought vainly for that fell word which he could read everywhere except in the newspaper before him; his sufferings had grown almost beyond his strength, for to his old torments was added harrowing suspense.

"Why?" "Why?" "Why" was the word that stared at him from ceiling and walls and blue expanse of heaven; why was it there and not in the papers? Could it be that it was lying there yet, that awful, still thing, lying as he remembered it, as he could see it now, its ghastly features hidden among the leaves that rotted, its long arms outflung and strong hands griped among the grass with clutching fingers — could it be? —

"Arthur — boy — what 's the matter?"

Spike started and looked up to find Hermione beside him, and instinctively he shrank away.

"Arthur — oh, what is it? Are you sick?"

"N-no, why?"

"You were moaning."

"Oh, well, I — I 'm all right, I guess. Got a headache, that 's all."

"Why have you avoided me lately, Arthur? I 'm not angry any more, I 'm only — disappointed."

"Y' mean because I lost me job? They don't want my kind; I — oh, I 'm too mean — too rotten, I guess."

"I heard you cry out in the night, Arthur. What was it?"

"Nothin' — I did n't cry out las' night, I tell ye."

"I heard you!"

"Oh, well, I — I was only dreamin', I guess."

"Why have you acted so strangely lately? You don't eat, you don't go out; you sit around staring and seem to be listening — almost as if you were afraid — "

"I ain't — I ain't afraid. Who says I 'm afraid? An' I don't want you to go worryin' y'self sick over me — I ain't a kid no more."

"No, I 'm afraid you 're not." And sighing, she turned away. But as she crossed the room, her step slow and listless, he spoke, his head downbent and face hidden between clenched hands, voicing, almost despite himself, the questions that had tortured him so long.

"Say, Hermy, where 's — Geoff? How is he — I mean you — you ain't — heard anything — have you?"

"No," she answered softly, without turning, "what should I hear? I only know he 's — gone. How should I hope to hear anything any more?"

"I — I thought he was — goin' t' marry you."

"So he was, but I — could n't let him — marry — a thief's sister," she said in the same low, even voice.

"Ah!" cried Spike, writhing, "why did he go an' tell ye about me after he told me he never would — why did he tell ye?"

"He did n't tell me!" cried Hermione, with curling lip.

"Did n't he — oh — did n't he?" said Spike, his voice

high and quivering, "did n't Geoff tell ye? Then — say, Hermy, who — who did?"

"It was Bud M'Ginnis, and for once it seems he told the truth!"

"Bud!" cried Spike, stumbling to his feet. "Oh, my God!" At sound of his voice she turned, and seeing his face, cried out in sudden fear: "Arthur — oh, Arthur, what is it?"

"Bud told ye?" he gasped. "Was n't it Geoff — oh, was n't it Geoff?"

"No!"

Spike was down on his knees. "Oh, God! Oh, Geoff — dear old Geoff, forgive me!" He was huddled upon the floor, his face pressed to the worn rug, his clenched fingers buried in his curls, while from his lips issued gasping sobs harshly dry and awful to hear.

"Forgive me, Geoff, forgive me! I thought you told her! I thought you meant t' steal her from me! Oh, forgive me, Geoff — I wish I was dead like you."

"Arthur!"

She was down beside him on her knees, shaking him with desperate hands.

"Arthur! Arthur! What — are you saying?"

"Nothin' — nothin'!" he stammered, staring up into her face, suddenly afraid of her. "Nothin', I — I was only — thinkin' — I — "

"What did you mean?" she cried, her grasp tightening. "Tell me what you meant — tell me, tell me!"

"Nothin'," he mumbled, trying to break her hold. "Lemme go, I — I did n't mean anything — "

"Tell me what you meant — tell me, tell me!"

"No — I can't — I — "

His voice failed suddenly, his whole frame grew tense and rigid, and lifting a stiff arm he pointed a trembling finger toward the open doorway.

"Hush — hush!" he panted, "oh, for God's sake, hush! There — don't you hear — there 's some one outside on th' landing — footsteps — hark! They 're coming

to our door! They 're stoppin' outside — oh, my God, it 's come at — "

The word ended in a scream, drowned all at once in a thunderous knocking on the outer door, and Spike, crouching upon his knees, clutched at her as she rose.

" Don't, — don't open — the door! " he gasped, while Hermione gazed at him, terrified by his terror, as again the thunderous summons was heard. Then, despite the boy's passionate prayers and desperate, clutching hands, she broke from him, and hastening into the little passage, opened the door.

Upon the threshold stood a little old man, very smartly dressed, who saluted her with a gallant flourish of his dapper straw hat and bowed with his two small and glittering patent leather shoes posed at position number one in waltzing.

" Ma'am," said he, " miss, respectful greetin's. Your name 's Hermione, ain't it? "

" Yes," she answered, wondering.

" Knowed it was. And a partic'ler fine gal too! Though not 'oldin' wi' marridge, I don't blame the Guv — 'e always 'ad a quick eye for beauty — like me."

" But who are you? What do you want — "

" Miss, I want you — leastways — 'e does. Been callin' for you the last three days 'e has, ever since 'e ketched one as fair doubled 'im up — "

" I — I don't understand. Who are you? "

" A admirer of the Guv, ma'am. A trusted friend of 'is, miss — come t' take ye to 'is poor, yearnin' arms, lady — "

" But who — oh, what do you mean? "

" Mr. Ravenslee, ma'am."

" Mr. Ravenslee! " she echoed, her colour changing.

" Yes. Y' see — he 's dyin', miss! "

Hermione gasped and leaned against the wall as if suddenly faint and sick, perceiving which, the Old Un promptly set his arm about her waist and led her unresisting into the parlour. There, having aided her ten-

derly into a chair and nodded to pale-faced Spike, he sighed, shook his ancient head, and continued:

"Ho, Lor lumme, lady, it fair wrung my old 'eart to 'ave to tell ye, but, 'aving to tell ye (Joe could n't) I told ye almighty quick to get it over — sharp an' quick 's my motter. Fate 's crool 'ard when Fate takes the gloves off, miss, an' I know as Fate 's been an' took ye one in the wind wot 's fair doubled you up — but take time, miss, take time — throw back your pretty 'ead, breathe deep an' reg'lar, an' you 'll soon be strong enough to go another round. If I 'd got a towel handy I 'd fan ye a bit — not 'avin' none, no matter. Fate 's 'ard on you, so fair an' young, miss, but Fate 's been 'arder on the Guv — ketched the pore young Guv a fair spiflicator — "

"Oh, please — please," cried Hermione, reaching out appealing hands, "oh, tell me, is he hurt — sick — dying? Oh, quick, quick — tell me!"

"Lady, ma'am — my pretty dear," said the Old Un, taking those pleading hands to pat them tenderly, "that 's what I 'm tryin' to do. The Guv ain't dead yet — no, not — yet — "

"You mean he 's dying?"

"My dear," said the old man, blinking at her through sudden tears, "that 's what the doctors say." Here he loosed one hand to rub at each bright eye with a bony knuckle. "An' 'im so young — so game an' strong — three days ago."

"How — did it — happen?" she questioned, her voice low and steady.

"It was Fate!" said the old man, taking her hand again. "Three days ago Fate (the perisher) sends him a telegram — two on 'em — tellin' 'im to meet you in a wood an' signed with — with your name, both on 'em — "

At this she cried out and would have risen, but his kindly clasp checked her.

"I — sent no telegram!" she whispered.

"Me an' Joe an' the Spider know that now, miss. But anyway, to this 'ere wood the Guv do 'aste away, an' in

this wood Fate 's a-layin' for 'im wi' a gun, an' down goes the pore Guv wi' a perishin' bullet in 'is gizzard. An' there Joe finds 'im, an' 'ome Joe brings 'im in the car, an' Joe an' me an' the Spider 'ushes things up. An' now in bed lays the Guv with nurses an' doctors 'anging over 'im — a-callin' for you — I mean the Guv, d' ye see? So now for you I 've come. I 've brought Joe an' the car for you — Joe 's across wi' Mrs. Trapes, an' the car 's below — both waitin'. So you 'll come t' th' pore young Guv, miss, won't ye, lady? "

" Have you — any idea — who — did it? " she questioned, speaking as with an effort.

" We got our suspicions, ho, yus! " the Old Un nodded. " Joe 's got a wonnerful gift o' suspicion — oh, a rare 'ead 'as my lad Joe. Joe an' the Spider 's on the track, an' they 're goin' to track Fate to doom, ma'am — to perishin' doom! Y' see," here the old man leaned suddenly nearer, " y' see, Joe 's found a cloo! "

" A clew! Yes — yes! " she whispered breathlessly, moistening lips suddenly dry, and conscious that Spike's lax form had stiffened to painful alertness.

" Well, ma'am, Joe an' the Spider 's been a-seekin' an' a-searchin' of that there wood, an' they found," here the Old Un leaned nearer yet and whispered harshly, " they found — a coat button! Lorgorramighty! " he exclaimed suddenly, pointing a trembling bony finger, " what 's took th' lad — look! "

Spike had risen and now stood, breathing loudly, one hand clenched upon his breast, and turning swiftly, took a stumbling pace toward the open window, tripped, and fell prone upon his face.

" Oh, poor lad, poor lad! " cried the Old Un, rising hastily. " Fate 's been an' ketched him one too — a fair knockout! Leave him to me, miss, I 'll bring 'im round — bitin' 'is years is good, or vinegar on a sponge — leave 'im to a old fightin' man — "

" No! " cried Hermione passionately, " no, I say. Leave him to me! " Quelled by something in her tone and man-

ner, the old man sank back in his chair, while she, kneeling beside Spike, lifted him in her strong young arms so that he was hidden from the Old Un's bright, piercing eyes. Holding him thus, she loosed Spike's rigid fingers and drew away that clutching hand; then, seeing what that hand had striven to hide, she shrank suddenly away, letting the boy's inanimate form slip from her clasp; and, as she knelt there above him, her shapely body was seized with fierce tremors.

So she knelt for a long moment until Spike sighed, shivered, and sat up, but beholding the look in her wide eyes, uttered a hoarse sound that was like a cry of fear and, starting from her nearness, crouched down, huddled upon his knees.

Then Hermione rose and, turning to the old man, smiled with pallid lips.

"You see — he 's all right — now!" she said. "If you 'll please go and tell Mrs. Trapes I 'm leaving, I 'll get ready." Obediently the Old Un rose.

"Mrs. Trapes is a-gettin' into her bonnet to come along wi' us!" said he, and putting on his hat with a flourish, took his departure. When he was gone, Hermione turned and looked down at Spike, who, meeting her eyes, flinched as from a blow and made no effort to rise from his knees. So she packed her grip and dressed for the journey, while he watched her with eyes of mute appeal. Twice he would have spoken, but her look smote him to silence. At last, as she took up her suit case and turned to go, he implored her in a hoarse whisper, reaching out his arms to her: "Hermy!"

But she shrank from his contact and, hastening from the room and along the little passage, closed the door and left him to his hopeless misery. As one in a dream she followed the old man down the stairs, was aware of his ushering her through the crowd of women and children who thronged about the big car. As one in a dream she found herself seated beside Mrs. Trapes, whose motherly solicitude she heeded no more than the bustle and traffic

of the streets through which the swift car whirled her on and on until, turning, it swung in between massive gates and pulled up before a great, gloomy house.

As one in a dream she ascended the broad steps, crossed a stately hall, was ushered up a noble stairway and along thick-carpeted corridors until at last she found herself in a darkened chamber where, his dark head conspicuous upon the white pillow, he lay. A nurse rose from beside the bed as Hermione entered and softly withdrew. Left alone, she stood for a long moment utterly still, her hands tightly clasped, her breath in check, gazing at that dark head upon the pillow, at that outstretched form lying so silent and so very still.

"Hermione!"

A feeble whisper, a sigh faintly breathed, but at the sound she had crossed the wide chamber on feet swift and noiseless, had sunk upon her knees beside the low bed to lean above him all murmurous love and sighing tenderness, while she stole a timid hand to touch the hair that curled upon his pallid brow; then, for all his helplessness, she flushed beneath his look.

"How beautiful — you are!" he said faintly, "and I — weak as — confounded rat! Hermione — love, they tell me I — must die. But first I want you for — my very own if only for — a little while!"

"Oh, my dear," she whispered, soft mouth against his pale cheek, "I always was yours — yours from the very first; I always shall be."

"Then you 'll — marry me?"

"Yes, dear."

"Now?"

"Yes, dear."

"I — hoped you would, so — I arranged — minister 's waiting now. Will you — ring?" And he motioned feebly toward an electric bell-push that stood upon a small table beside the bed.

And now once again as one in a dream she obeyed, and was presently aware of soft-treading figures about her in

the dim chamber — among them the Old Un whose shoes for once creaked not at all. As one in a dream she made the responses, felt the feeble clasp of that hand whose strength and masterful power had thrilled her, heard the faint echo of that loved voice that had wooed her so passionately once, yet wooed in vain, while now —

She was alone again, alone with him who lay so very still and pale with eyes closed wearily; from him she glanced to that which gleamed so bright and new upon her finger and bending her head she pressed the wedding ring to her lips.

"Wife!" he whispered; the weary eyes were open, and his look drew her. So she knelt beside the bed again, stooping above him low and lower until her head lay beside his upon the pillow. Slowly, slowly his feeble hand crept up to her glowing cheek, to the soft waves of her hair, and to the little curl that wantoned above her eyebrow.

"Hermione — wife — kiss me!"

Tenderly her arms enfolded him, and with a soft little cry that was half a sob she kissed him, his brow, his hair, his lips, kissed him even while she wetted him with her falling tears.

"Beloved," he murmured, "my glorious — scrub-woman — if I must — leave you — these dear hands need never — never slave again. Never — any — more, my Hermione."

Long after he had fallen to sleep she knelt there, cradling his weakness in her arms, looking down on him with eyes bright with love.

After this were days and nights when the soul of him wandered in dark places filled with chaotic dreams and wild fancies; but there was ever one beside him whose gentle voice reached him in the darkness, and whose tender hand hushed his delirium and soothed his woes and troubles.

CHAPTER XXXV

HOW GEOFFREY RAVENSLEE CAME OUT OF THE DARK

She was knitting; and opening sleepy eyes he watched drowsily and wondered what it might be and was minded to enquire, but sighed instead and fell asleep again.

She was knitting; knitting something in red wool, and opening his eyes again, he lay watching awhile and pondered dreamily as to what it could be she wrought at so busily, for the wool was so very red and so extremely woolly.

Her chin was set at an angle somewhat grim, she was sitting very upright in her chair and, though scrupulously hidden from sight, her elbows — truly how portentous were the undisguisable points of those elbows! And she was knitting fiercely in wool that was remarkably red and woolly.

"Pray what is it, Mrs. Trapes?" A feeble whisper, but, at the sound, faint though it was, Mrs. Trapes started, half rose from her chair, sank down again heavily and letting fall her knitting, stared at the invalid.

"Land sakes, alive!" she gasped.

"Now you 've dropped it!" said Ravenslee, his voice a little stronger.

"Oh, dear beloved land o' my fathers — it 's come!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands, "the Lord be praised for evermore, it 's come!"

"What has?"

"The turn! And you 've took it! Doctor Dennison says last night as you 'd take it soon one way or t' other. But all night long while they waited and watched here, you 've laid so pale an' still as a corp'. An' now, while

I 'm a-settin' here, you go an' take th' turn so sudden as fair takes my breath away, Lord be praised! I mean — I mean — oh, I guess I 'll go wake the doctor."

"But you have n't told me what it is," said Ravenslee drowsily.

"What what is?"

"That very peculiar — woolly thing."

"This?" said Mrs. Trapes, picking up the object in question, "this is my knittin'. Doctor said t' call him th' moment th' turn came — " Her voice seemed to sink to a slumberous murmur as, having smoothed his pillow, she crossed the room and very softly closed the door behind her; wherefore Ravenslee blinked sleepily at the door until its panels seemed slowly to become confused and merge one into another, changing gradually to a cloud, soft, billowy, and ever growing until it had engulfed him altogether, and he sank down and down into unknown deeps of forgetfulness and blessed quietude.

She was knitting; knitting a shapeless something in red wool, and Ravenslee thought he had never known her elbows more threatening of aspect nor seen wool quite so red and woolly; wherefore he presently spoke, and his voice was no longer a feeble croak.

"Pray what is it, Mrs. Trapes?"

Mrs. Trapes jumped.

"Well, for th' love o' heaven!" she exclaimed, and down fell her knitting.

"Now you 've dropped it!" said Ravenslee a little petulantly.

"Your very — identical — words!" said Mrs. Trapes in awed tones. "Nacher sure 'moves in a mysterious way her wonders to perform'!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean as them was the identical words as you addressed to me when you took th' turn two days ago!"

"Two days!" exclaimed Ravenslee, staring.

"Ever since you did take the turn two days ago, you 've

laid there so quiet an' peaceful — no more dreams an' ravin' — you 've jest laid there 'wrapped in infant slumbers pure an' light', Mr. Geoffrey — Ravenslee, I mean."

"Why then, it 's about time I got up. If you 'll kindly — er — retire and send Patterson, I 'll get dressed."

"Dressed?" echoed Mrs. Trapes, hollow-voiced and grim. "Get up? Lord, Mr. Geoffrey!"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"What, you — you as is only jest out o' the valley o' th' shadder! You as we 've all give up for dead over an' over! You get up? Lord, Mr. Geoffrey — I mean Ravenslee!"

"Oh," said Ravenslee, knitting his dark brows thoughtfully, "have I been sick long?"

"Four weeks."

"Weeks!" he exclaimed, staring incredulously.

"Four weeks an' a bit! For four weary, woeful weeks you 've been layin' here with death hoverin' over you, Mr. Geoffrey. For four long weeks we 've been waitin' for ye t' draw your las' breath, Mr. Ravenslee. For four 'eart-rendin' weeks your servants has been carryin' on below stairs an' robbin' you somethin' shameful."

"My servants? Oh, yes, they generally do. But tell me — "

"The amount o' food as they consoom constant! The waste! The extravagance! Th' beer an' wine an' sperrits they swaller! Them is sure the thirstiest menials ever I heard tell of! An' the butler — such airs, such a appetite! An' sherry an' bitters t' make it worse! Lord, Mr. Geoffrey, your servants sure is a ravenin' horde!"

"Don't be too hard on 'em, Mrs. Trapes," he answered gravely, "I 'm afraid I 've neglected them quite a good deal. But it 's a woman's hand they need over them."

"It 's a pleeceman's club they need on 'em — frequent! I 'd learn 'em different, I guess — "

"So you shall, Mrs. Trapes, if you will. You are precisely the kind of housekeeper I need."

"What — me?"

"You, Mrs. Trapes. A lonely bachelor needs some one to — er take care of his servants for him, to see they don't overeat themselves too often; or — er — strain themselves spring-cleaning out of season — or — "

"But you got a wife t' do all that for you. I guess Hermy 'll know how to manage."

"Hermione!" said Ravenslee, starting, "wife? Am I really — married?"

"Sure! Did n't she go an' let you wed her when we all thought you was dyin'?"

"Oh, did she?" said he very gently. "Why then, it — it was n't all a dream?"

"Mr. Geoffrey, Hermy 's been Mrs. Ravenslee, your lawful wedded wife, just exactly four weeks."

Ravenslee stared up at the ceiling, dreamy-eyed.

"Good heavens!" he murmured. "I thought I 'd only dreamed it."

"Hermy 's watched over you night an' day a'most — like th' guardian angel she is — prayin' f' you, workin' f' you, fightin' death away from you. Oh, I guess it 's her fault as you 're alive this day! Anyway, her an' you 's man an' wife till death do you part."

"But death — has n't, you see."

"An' death sure ain't goin' to — yet."

"No, I 'm — I 'm very much alive still, it seems."

"You sure are, glory be t' th' Lord of Hosts to who I have also petitioned frequent on your behoof. An' now I 'll call th' doctor."

"No, no — not Dennison; let me see her first. Can't I speak to Hermione first, Mrs. Trapes?"

"She was up with you all las' night, sweet lamb! It 'd be a shame to wake her — "

"So it would — don't disturb her."

"But I guess she 'd never forgive me if I did n't wake her. So if you 'll promise t' be good — "

"I will!"

"An' not go gettin' all worked up an' excited?"

"I will not!"

"Why then, perhaps ten minutes would n't hurt."

"God bless you, Mrs. Trapes!"

Left alone, he tried to sit up, and finding this strangely difficult, examined his hands and arms, scowling to find himself so weak. Then he clapped hand to bony jaw and was shocked to feel thereon a growth of ragged beard, and then — she was before him. Fresh from her slumbers she came, wrapped in a scanty kimono whose thin, clinging folds revealed more of her shapely beauty than he had ever seen as she hurried across the wide chamber.

"Hermione," he said, and reached out his hands to her. And his voice was no longer the feeble echo it had been; the hand that clasped hers, though still thin and weak, thrilled her anew with its masterful touch. Because of all this, her words of tender greeting remained unspoken, the arms which had been eager to cradle his helplessness crossed themselves on her bosom; she became aware of naked ankles and of bare feet thrust into bedroom slippers and needs must hide them, and the better to do so, sank upon the bed, her feet tucked under her. So she sat, just beyond his reach, and, conscious of scanty draperies, shook her shining hair about her, veiling herself in its glory.

"Hermione," he said unsteadily, "I — I never knew quite how beautiful you were — and we — we are married, it seems!"

"Yes," she said softly.

"And now I 'm — I 'm afraid I 'm going to — live!"

"Afraid?"

"It — it almost seems as though I had married you under false pretences, does n't it? But the doctors and everybody were so certain I was to die that I thought so too. And now — I 'm going to live, it seems."

She was silent, and slowly his hand went out to her again, and slowly hers went to meet it, but though her fingers clasped and twined, thrilling in mute passion to his touch, she came no nearer, but watched him from the shadow of her hair with great troubled eyes.

"Dear," he said, very humbly, "you do — love me still, don't you?"

"More than ever."

"Then you 're not — sorry to be my wife?"

"No — ah, no, no!" she whispered, "never that!"

"Then, dear, won't you — will you kiss me?" Seeing she hesitated, he sank back on his pillow and laughed a little ruefully. "I forgot these confounded whiskers — I must look an unholy object. Patterson shall shave me, and then perhaps —"

But sudden and warm and soft her arms were about him, and her eyes, troubled no longer, gazed into his, brimful of yearning tenderness.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," she murmured, quick and passionate, "as if I should ever care how you looked as long as you were — just you. My dear, my dear, you have come back to me from the very gates of death because I — I —"

"Because you nursed me so tenderly!"

"Ah, no, there were others to do that — no, God gave you back to me because He is merciful, and because I love you — want you — need you so much!"

"Oh, my Hermione — Kiss me!"

A knock at the door, and, quick-breathing, she drew from him as the voice of Mrs. Trapes reached them.

"Ten minutes is up!" she announced as she entered, "and Hermy, if you don't want th' doctor t' see you in your nightdress an' that —"

"Ann!" gasped Hermione, drawing the folds of her kimono about her.

"Anyway, he 's coming."

Up sprang Hermione, in doing which she lost a slipper.

"Give it me!" she pleaded, for Ravenslee had caught it up.

"Dear, you have one — be content," he answered. "And surely I may kiss my wife's slipper without you having to blush so — so deliciously, Hermione?"

"It 's so — old and shabby!" said she faintly.

"That's why I kiss it."

"An' here comes th' doctor!" said Mrs. Trapes. Whereat Hermione incontinent fled away, white foot agleam. Then Ravenslee, having kissed the little slipper quite brazenly under Mrs. Trapes's staring eyes, tucked it beneath his pillow.

"Why, Mr. Geoffrey!" said Mrs. Trapes.

CHAPTER XXXVI

CONCERNING A CLEW

"Mrs. Trapes," said Ravenslee, laying aside the book he had been reading and letting his glance wander across smooth lawns and clipped yew hedges, "Mrs. Trapes, what about that stewed shin of beef with carrots and onions you prepared for — our wedding supper?"

"Which," said Mrs. Trapes, glancing up from her everlasting knitting, "which you never stopped to eat."

"Which omission I will now haste to rectify. Mrs. Trapes, pray go and get it ready — I 'm ravenous!"

"Good f'r you!" said Mrs. Trapes; "in about half an hour you shall have a nice cup of beef tea to raven at —"

"Confounded slops!" growled Ravenslee.

"Doctor's orders!" nodded Mrs. Trapes, clicking her knitting needles.

"Can't I have something to chew at?"

"Sure. How 'll a cracker soaked in milk soot?"

"Cracker!" snarled Ravenslee.

"Doctor's orders!"

Ravenslee muttered and took up his book.

"Helen who, did you say?" enquired Mrs. Trapes, glancing up. "Mr. Geoffrey — I mean Ravenslee, I 'm surprised at you — swearin' ain't good for a invalid; your temperature 'll be rose if you swear."

"But, my dear Mrs. Trapes, I 'm hungry, very hungry — darned hungry!"

"Which is a sign as you 're improvin' rapid. Beef tea 'll be here soon."

"I won't drink the stuff!"

"Oh, but you will, when Hermy brings it."

"Hermione!" said Ravenslee, his voice grown gentle, and laying down his book again. "Mrs. Trapes, have you noticed any change in her lately?"

"A bit handsomer, p'r'aps —"

"Yes, but I don't mean that; it 's something that puzzles me. She seems to have grown more — more reserved and shy —"

"Well, she was married to you before she knew it kind of, almost."

"Do you suppose that 's it?"

"Sure! What you got t' do, Mr. Geoffrey, is — woo her! Woo her all you know how. The best woman can't be wooed too hard nor too frequent — so you start in an' woo."

"But sometimes it has almost seemed that she — avoided me."

"Well, don't let her."

"Do you suppose she 's grieving for Spike?"

"Well, he ain't exactly a j'y t' her. There he is going straight to the devil along o' that Bud M'Ginnis!"

"I must go and fetch him as soon as I can get about again."

"If he 'll come."

"Oh, he 'll come," said Ravenslee grimly. "I 've decided to send him to college —"

"If he 'll go!"

"Oh, he 'll go — there 's quite a lot of good in him, Mrs. Trapes."

"Only it 's mighty hard to find, Mr. Geoffrey! If that b'y wants t' go t' th' devil, to th' devil he 'll go. What you got t' do is t' make her forget him — if you can. Oh, drat him, anyway!" and squaring her elbows, Mrs. Trapes knitted so angrily that her knitting needles clashed like weapons fiercely opposed.

"Yes, but suppose she is grieving for him, Mrs. Trapes?"

"Why then," said Mrs. Trapes, "why then — oh, shucks — I guess I 'll go an' see after that beef tea."

When she had gone, Ravenslee sat plunged in gloomy thought until roused by the sound of approaching feet with a creak of shoes, a loud, arrogant creak there was no mistaking, and the Old Un appeared followed by Joe and the Spider, the latter looking very smart in his new livery.

"Guv," said the Old Un, "best respex! 'Ere we be, come to say 'ow glad we are t' see you come up smilin' an' ready for more after Fate ketchin' ye a perishin' wallop as we all thought 'ad doubled ye up till the day o' doom. 'Ere you are, on your pins again, an' 'ere 's us come t' give ye greetin's doo an' j'y o' your marriage — shut up, Joe!"

"Why, I was n't speakin'!" growled Joe.

"No, but you meant to — you 're always meanin' to, you are. Guv," continued the Old Un, "folks is allus a-givin' an' takin' in marriage in this 'ere world, such bein' their natur' — they can't 'elp it! But never in this world nor no other was there ever sich a weddin' as yours. There was 'er so young an' fair an' full o' life, an' there was you so pale an' nigh to death — one leg in the grave — an' there was me s' full o' years an' wisdom an' sorrer for ye both — oh, my pore old bowels was fair yearnin' over ye — "

"Lord, Old Un," expostulated Joe, "you keep them bowels o' yours out of it — "

"Shut up, Joe, in your ignorance; bowels is in the Bible, an' bowels I abide by now and forever, amen! Well, there we all were, Guv, bendin' o'er your couch o' care very silent an' solemn,

'Not a drum was 'eard, not a funereal note'

an' there was you s' pale an' nigh t' death — "

"You said all that afore, Old Un!" growled Joe.

"You leave me alone, Joe," said the Old Un, scowling and flourishing a trembling fist, "you lemme be, or you 'll be pale an' nigh t' death next. Well, there was you, Guv, an' all s' pale an' still when: ' 'Oo giveth this woman?'

says the parson-cove very solemn. 'That 's me!' says I, quick an' ready. An' so, me 'avin' 'elped t' marry you, I 've brought Joe an' Spider t' wish you 'ealth an' 'appiness an' a j'y continual. Now, Joe, it 's your round — speak up!"

"Sir," said Joe heavily, "I — we — I mean — Lord, sir, I am that glad — ah, glad as — as never was — "

"That 'll do for you, Joe!" snapped the Old Un. "Spider's round."

Hereupon the Spider lurched forward, hunched his wide shoulders, took off his smart cap, and stared at it very hard.

"Bo," said he, chewing vigorously, "I mean boss — er — no, that ain't right either — this is sure a bum start I 'm makin' — "

"'Bo' will do, Spider," said Ravenslee, "let it go at that."

"Why then, bo, I ain't one as is ever goin' t' win any gold-mounted testimonials at any talk-fest or heart-throbbin' spiel-act, but what I wanter tell you is this — an' I guess you know I ain't only breathin' out puffs o' hot air — I want yer t' know as I feel about you like — like Joe an' the Old Un does — an' then some more. Y' see, bo, though I ain't never held a straight flush agin four aces an' don't expect to, though I shan't ever be a world's champion like Joe here — I guess I know to-day what it feels like, because you ain't goin' t' snuff it, after all — an' now I guess you 're on." Saying which, the Spider dexterously shifted his wad to the other cheek and chewed faster than ever.

"I am, Spider, and I want you to know I 'm grateful to you, all three. Also I want to thank you all for keeping this affair out of the papers, though how you managed it beats me."

"Guv," cried the Old Un, tremulous and eager, "oh, Guv, we 're fair sleuth-hounds, we are — specially me. There ain't a 'tective nor secret-service cove nor bloomin' bobby fit to black our shoes — specially mine! Y' see,

Guv, I know who done it; Joe thinks he knows; an' Spider don't think at all!"

"Oh?" said Ravenslee, and looking around, caught the Spider watching him wide-eyed, his jaws grimly tense and immobile; but meeting his glance, the Spider lowered his eyes, shifted his smartly-gaitered legs, and chewed viciously.

"So, Guv," piped the Old Un cheerily, "we 're out for the criminal's gore — specially me. We 're goin' to track the perisher to 'is 'orrible doom —

'Where'er he be
To th' gallers tree
Oh, Guv, we mean t' bring him;
An' laugh with j'y
When nice an' 'igh
The blinkin' bobbies swing 'im.'"

"And you think you know who it was?"

"I do, Guv, I do!" nodded the Old Un. "I knows as 't was a enemy as done it; Joe thinks it was one o' them gang fellers, an' Spider don't say who he thinks done it."

Once again Ravenslee caught the Spider's eye watching him furtively, and once again he noticed that the Spider's jaws were clamped hard, while he was twisting his natty chauffeur's cap in fingers strangely agitated.

"Sir," said Joe, "me an' the Spider searched that wood, an' we found a coat — "

"Shut up, Joe," snarled the Old Un, "you 're tellin' it all wrong. Guv, Joe an' the Spider went a-seekin' an' a-searchin' that wood, an' they found a — cloo — "

"Oh?" said Ravenslee.

"A cloo as is a-goin' t' 'ang somebody yet — a cloo, Guv, as ain't t' be ekalled for blood-guilt an' mystery. Joe," said the Old Un, sinking his voice to a hoarse whisper, "the hour is come — perjooce the cloo!"

Hereupon Joe produced a pocketbook and took thence a highly ornate coat button whereto a shred of cloth was attached.

"I found this, sir," said he, "close by where you was a-lyin'." So Ravenslee took the button upon his palm, and, as he eyed it, the Spider saw his black brows twitch suddenly together, then — he yawned.

"And you found this in the wood, Joe?" he enquired sleepily.

"I did, sir. With that to help 'em, the perlice would have the murdering cove in no time, and more than once I 've been going to hand it over to 'em. But then I thought I 'd better wait a bit; if you died was time enough, an' if you did n't I 'd keep it for you — so, sir, there it is."

"You did quite right, Joe. Yes, you did very right indeed!"

For a long moment Ravenslee sat languidly twisting the button in thin white fingers, then flicked it far out over the balustrade down among the dense evergreens in the garden below. The Old Un gasped, Joe gaped, and the Spider sighed audibly.

"Lorgorramighty! Oh, Guv, Guv — " quavered the old man, "you 've throwed away our cloo — our blood-cloo — th' p'lice — you 've lost our evidence — "

"Old Un, of course I have! You see, I don't like clews, or blood, or the police. You have all been clever enough, wise enough to keep this confounded business quiet, and so will I — "

"But, oh, Guv, arter somebody tryin' t' kill ye like a dog — ain't there goin' t' be no vengeance, no gallers-tree, no 'lectric chair nor nothin' — "

"Nothing!" answered Ravenslee gently. "Somebody tried to kill me, but somebody did n't kill me; here I am, getting stronger every day, so we 'll let it go at that."

"Why then — I 'm done!" said the Old Un, rising. "Guv, you 're crool an' stony-'earted! 'Ere 's me, a pore old cove as has been dreamin' an' dreamin' o' gallers-trees an' 'lectric chairs, and 'ere 's you been an' took 'em off me! Guv, I 'm disapp'inted wi' ye. Oh, ingratitood, thou art the Guv!" So saying, the Old Un clapped on his hat and creaked indignantly away.

"Crumbs!" exclaimed Joe, "what a bloodthirsty old cove he is, with his gallers-trees! This means jam, this does."

"Jam?" repeated Ravenslee wonderingly.

"Sir, whenever the Old Un 's put out, 'e flies to jam same as some chaps do to drink; makes a fair old beast of hisself, he do. If you 'll excuse us, sir, Spider an' me 'll just keep a eye on him to see as he don't go upsettin' his old innards again."

Ravenslee nodded, and smiling, watched them hurry after the little old man; but gradually his amusement waned, and he became lost in frowning thought. So deeply abstracted was he that he started to find Mrs. Trapes regarding him with her sharp, bright eyes.

"Mr. Geoffrey, here 's a cup o' beef tea as I 've prepared with my own hand —"

"But where 's —"

"She 's gone t' bed. Here 's a cup o' beef tea as is stiff with nourishment, so get it into your system good an' quick."

"Gone to bed —"

"She says it 's a headache, o' course — drink it down while it 's hot — but I reckon it 's more 'n a headache — yes, sir. A while back I says t' you — 'woo her,' I says, Mr. Geoffrey. I now says — let her alone awhile. The poor child 's all wore out — it 's nerves as is the matter with her, I reckon. So, Mr. Ravenslee, be patient, this ain't no wooin' time; it 's rest she needs an' change of air —"

"Why, then, Mrs. Trapes, she shall have them!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE WOES OF MR. BRIMBERLY

Mr. Brimberly, having dined well as was his custom, lay at his ease in a luxurious lounge chair in the shade of the piazza; the day was hot, wherefore on a table at his elbow was a syphon, a bottle, and a long glass in which ice tinkled alluringly; between his plump fingers was a large cigar and across his plump knees was an open paper over which he yawned and puffed and sipped in turn. Nevertheless Mr. Brimberly was bored and dropping the paper, languidly cherished a languorous whisker, staring dull-eyed across stately terraces and wide, neat lawns to where, beyond winding yew walks and noble trees, the distant river flowed.

Presently as he sat he was aware of a small girl in a white pinafore approaching along one of these walks — a small being who hopped along by means of a little crutch and sang to herself in a soft, happy voice.

Mr. Brimberly blinked.

Heedless of the eyes that watched her, the child turned into the rose garden, pausing now and then to inhale the scent of some great bloom that filled the air with its sweetness.

Mr. Brimberly sat up, for he permitted few to enter the rose garden.

All at once the child, singing still, reached up and broke off a great scarlet bloom.

Mr. Brimberly arose.

"Little girl!" he called, in voice round and sonorous, "little girl, come you 'ere and come immediate!"

The child started, turned, and after a moment's hesitation hobbled forward, her little face as white as her pinafore. At the foot of the broad steps leading up to the piazza she paused, looking up at him with great, pleading eyes.

Mr. Brimberly beckoned with portentous finger.

"Little girl, come 'ere!" he repeated. "Come up 'ere and come immediate!"

The small crutch tapped laboriously up the steps, and she stood before Mr. Brimberly's imposing figure mute, breathless, and trembling a little.

"Little girl," he demanded, threatening of whisker, "'oo are you and — what?"

"Please, I 'm Hazel."

"Oh, indeed," nodded Mr. Brimberly, pulling at his waistcoat. "'Azel 'oo, 'Azel what — and say 'sir' next time, if *you* please."

"Hazel Bowker, sir," and she dropped him a little curtsey, spoiled somewhat by agitation and her crutch.

"Bowker — Bowker?" mused Mr. Brimberly. "I 've 'eard the name — I don't like the name, but I 've 'eard it."

"My daddy works here, sir," said Hazel timidly.

"Bowker — Bowker!" repeated Mr. Brimberly. "Ah, to be sure — one of the hunder gardeners as I put on three or four weeks ago."

"Yes, please, sir."

"Little girl, what are you a-doin' in that garden? Why are you wandering in the vi-cinity of this mansion?"

"Please, I 'm looking for Hermy."

"'Ermy?" repeated Mr. Brimberly, "'Ermy? Wot kind of creater may that be? Is it a dog? Is it a cat? Wot is it?"

"It 's only my Princess Nobody, sir!"

"Oh, a friend of yours — ha! Persons of that class do not pervade these regions! And wot do I be'old grasped in your 'and?"

Hazel looked down at the rose she held and trembled anew.

"Little girl — wot is it?" demanded the inexorable voice.

"A rose, sir."

"Was it — your rose?"

"N-no, sir."

"Don't you know as it 's a wicked hact to take what ain't yours? Don't you know as it 's thieving and robbery, and that thieving and robbery leads to prison bars and shackle-chains?"

"Oh, sir, I — I did n't mean —" the little voice was choked with sobs.

"Well, let this be a warning to you to thieve no more, or next time I shall 'ave to become angry. Now — go 'ence!"

Dropping the rose the child turned and hobbled away as fast as her crutch would allow, and Mr. Brimberly, having watched her out of sight, emptied his glass and took up his cigar, but, finding it had gone out, flung it away. Then he sighed and, sinking back among his cushions, closed his eyes, and was soon snoring blissfully.

But by and by Mr. Brimberly began to dream, a very evil dream wherein it seemed that for many desperate deeds and crime abominable he was chained and shackled in a dock, and the judge, donning the black cap, sentenced him to be shorn of those adornments, his whiskers. In his dream it seemed that there and then the executioner advanced to his fell work — a bony hand grasped his right whisker, the deadly razor flashed, and Mr. Brimberly awoke gurgling — awoke to catch a glimpse of a hand so hastily withdrawn that it seemed to vanish into thin air.

"'Eavens and earth!" he gasped, and clapping hand to cheek was relieved to find his whisker yet intact, but for a long moment sat clutching that handful of soft and fleecy hair, staring before him in puzzled wonder, for the hand had seemed so very real he could almost feel it there yet. Presently, bethinking him to glance over his shoulder, Mr. Brimberly gasped and goggled, for leaning over the back of his chair was a little, old man, very slender,

very upright, and very smart as to attire, who fanned himself with a jaunty straw hat banded in vivid crimson; an old man whose bright, youthful eyes looked out from a face wizened with age, while up from his bald crown rose a few wisps of white and straggling hair.

"'Oly 'eavens!" murmured Mr. Brimberly in a faint voice.

The visitor, settling his bony elbows more comfortably, fanned himself until his sparse locks waved gently to and fro, and, nodding, spoke these words:

> "Oh, wake thee, oh, wake thee, my bonny bird,
> Oh, wake and sleep no more;
> Thy pretty pipe I 'ave n't 'eard,
> But, lumme, how you snore!"

Mr. Brimberly stared; Mr. Brimberly's mouth opened, and eventually Mr. Brimberly rose and surveyed the intruder slowly, up from glittering shoes to the dome of his head and down again; and Mr. Brimberly's ample bosom surged, his eye kindled, and his whiskers —!

"Cheer-o!" nodded the Old Un.

Mr. Brimberly blinked and pulled down his waistcoat.

"Me good man," said he, "you 'll find the tradesmen's entrance round the corner. Go away, if you please, and go immediate — I 'm prehoccupied."

"No, you ain't; you 're the butler, you are, I lay my oath —

> 'Spoons an' forks
> An' drawin' corks'

that 's your job, ain't it, chum?"

"Chum!" said Mr. Brimberly in tones of horror. "Chum!" he repeated, grasping a handful of indignant whisker. "Oh, outragious! Oh, very hobscene! 'Ow dare you, sir? 'Oo are you, sir, eh, sir — answer me, an' answer — prompt!"

"Leave them cobwebs alone, an' I 'll tell you, matey."

"Matey!" groaned Mr. Brimberly, turning up his eyes.

"I 'm the Guv's familiar friend and personal pal, I am.

I 'm 'is adviser, confeedential, matreemonial, circumstantial, an' architect'ral. I 'm 'is trainer, advance agent, manager, an' sparrin' partner — that 's who I am. An' now, mate, 'avin' 'elped to marry 'im, I 've jest took a run down 'ere to see as all things is fit an' proper for 'is 'oneymoon!"

"My word, this is a mad feller, this is!" murmured Mr. Brimberly, "or else 'e 's drunk!"

"Drunk?" exclaimed the Old Un, clapping on his hat very much over one eye and glaring, "wot — me?"

"I repeat," said Mr. Brimberly, addressing the universe in general, "I repeats as 'e is a narsty, drunken little person!"

"Person?" cried the Old Un, scowling, "why, you perishin' — "

"'Old!" said Mr. Brimberly, "'old, I beg! Enough 'as been said — go 'ence! 'Oo you are I do not know, wot you are I do not care, but in these regions you do not remain; your langwidge forbids and — "

"Langwidge?" snorted the Old Un. "Why, I ain't begun yet, you blinkin', fat-faced, owl-eyed piece o' sooet — "

"Your speech, sir," continued Mr. Brimberly with calm austerity and making the most of whiskers and waistcoat, "your speech is re-dolent of slums and back halleys. I don't know you. I don't want to know you! You are a feller! Go away, feller!"

"Feller?" snarled the Old Un, "why you — "

"I repeat," said Mr. Brimberly with dignified deliberation, "I repeat as you are a very low, vulgar little feller!"

The Old Un clenched his fists.

"Right-o!" he nodded cheerily. "That 's done it! F' that I 'm a-goin' t' punch ye in th' perishin' eye-'ole!" And he advanced upon the points of his toes, shoulders hunched, and head viciously outthrust.

"My word!" exclaimed Mr. Brimberly, retreating rather precipitately, "this is very discomposing, this is! I shall have to call the perlice."

"Perlice!" snarled the Old Un, fiercer than ever, "you won't have nothing t' call with when I 've done wi' ye. I 'm goin' t' jab ye on th' beak t' begin with, then I 'll 'ook my left t' your kidneys an' swing my right to your p'int an' crumple ye up with a jolt on your perishin' solar plexus as 'll stiffen you till th' day o' doom!"

"'Oly angels!" murmured Mr. Brimberly, glancing hastily about.

"Then while you lay bathed in 'orrible gore, I 'm goin' t' twist them whiskers into a 'angman's knot!"

"This is most distressing!" sighed Mr. Brimberly.

"Then," continued the Old Un, grinding his remaining teeth, "I 'm a-goin' t' tread your face in an' dance on y'r blighted stummick. Arter that —"

"Oh, dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Brimberly, retreating before the oncoming peril and mopping perspiring brow. But suddenly his wandering eye was arrested by velvet and gold braid, and lifting up his voice he called:

"William! James! Come 'ere — and come sharp!"

Two vast and splendid shapes loomed upon the scene, supermen whose silken calves quivered with unaccustomed haste; at a sign from Mr. Brimberly they seized upon the Old Un and, despite ghoulish threats, solemnly bore him off.

Down the broad sweep of drive they went, the Old Un pouring forth fluent curses with every step, until they came to a powerful automobile from beneath which a pair of neatly gaitered legs protruded.

"Joe!" cried the Old Un, apostrophising these legs, "Joe, stop bein' a crawlin' worm — come out an' bash these perishers for me, like a good lad!" But even while he spoke, the footmen hauled him along, so that when Joe eventually wriggled from under the car the three were close against the great gates.

The Old Un was earnestly explaining to his captors exactly what he thought of them, of their fathers and mothers, their kith and kin, and the supermen were heeding him not the least, when a thunderbolt seemed to smite

them asunder, and Joe was glancing mild-eyed from one splendid, supine form to the other.

"Hullo, Old Un!" said he, "what 's the matter now, you old book o' bad language, you?"

But Mr. Brimberly, somewhat shaken with his late interview and feeling the need of a stimulant, had just refilled the long glass when, hearing a rustle behind him, he turned and beheld a tall woman, elderly and angular, especially as to chin and elbows, which last obtruded themselves quite unpleasantly; at least, as he eyed them there was manifest disapprobation in every hair of his whiskers.

"Now I wonder," he sighed plaintively, "I wonder what under the blue expandment of 'oly 'eaven you might be, because if you 'appen to be the washing — "

"I — am — not!"

"Or the cannybal missions — "

"No — sech — thing!"

"Oh!" said Mr. Brimberly, and his gaze wandered to the elbows. "Why, then, let me hinform you — "

"Ann Angelina Trapes is me name."

"Why then, ma'am, you 've took the wrong turning. 'Owbeit an' notwithstanding, 'ooever you are and nevertheless, you will find the tradespeople's entra — "

"You 're the gentleman as is so obligin' as to be Mr. Ravenslee's butler, ain't you?"

"Sich is my perfession," Mr. Brimberly admitted. "I am in sole charge of these pre-mises and so being will ask you to withdraw 'ence immediate. I will ask — "

"An' I 'll ask you, very p'inted, what you reckon you 're doin' in that chair?"

"Doing?"

"I 'll ask you, very p'inted, why you 're loafin' around wastin' your master's time?"

"Loafing?" cried Mr. Brimberly, very red in the face. "Loaf — "

"I also ask you, very p'inted, wherefore an' why you loaf, guzzlin' an' swillin' your master's good liquor?"

"Guzzling!" gasped Mr. Brimberly. "Oh, 'eavens, this is a outrage, this is! I 'll — "

"It sure is! An' so are you, winebibber!"

"Winebib — " Mr. Brimberly choked, his round face grew purple, and he flourished pudgy fists while Mrs. Trapes folded her cotton-gloved hands and watched him.

"Winebibber!" she nodded. "An' the wine as you now bib is your master's, consequently it was stole, an' bein' stole you 're a thief, an' bein' a thief — "

"Thief!" gurgled Mr. Brimberly. "Ha, thief 's a hepithet, thief is, and a hepithet 's hactionable! I 'll 'ave you indented for perjoorious expressions — "

"Winebibber!" she sighed. "Snake an' plunderer!"

"Never," cried Mr. Brimberly, "never in all my days did I ever 'earken to such contoomacious contoomacity! 'Oo are you an' wot — "

"Hand over that bottle and what you 've left o' them cigars!"

"Woman, begone!" he cried hoarsely. "Woman, if you don't go 'ence this very moment, I 'll have you persecuted with the hutmost vigour o' the law for a incorrigible — female!"

"Female!" repeated Mrs. Trapes; and clasping herself in her long, bony arms she shuddered and smiled, though her eyes glared more stonily, and her elbows suggested rapier points, daggers, and other deadly weapons of offence.

"Female it were, I think?" she enquired with another grim and smiling shudder. "Now, sir, to you I sez, debased creecher, I sez, vulgar an' dishonest loafer, I sez, sly an' subtle serpent, I sez, return to the back scullery wherefrom you sprang lest I seize you by the hair of your cheeks an' bounce your silly head against the wall — frequent, I sez!" and very slowly, Mrs. Trapes moved toward him.

Mr. Brimberly hesitated, but before those deadly elbows he blenched, his whiskers wilted all at once, and he retreated backwards; across the spacious drawing room,

along the hall and down the stairs he went, his pace ever accelerating, until, in full flight, he reached the sanctuary of his pantry, where, having locked himself securely in, he sank panting into a chair to mop beaded brow.

"My word!" said Mr. Brimberly.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

IN WHICH SOAPY TAKES UPON HIMSELF A NEW RÔLE

Soapy was alone, which in itself was no new thing, for Soapy was a solitary soul at all times; but just now he sat close against the rotting fence which skirted that desolation behind O'Rourke's saloon. Moreover, it was night, and solitude profound was his. He sat on a battered and disused pail that chanced to be handy, a smouldering cigarette dangling from his thin-lipped mouth, his long hands pendulous between his knees, his pallid eyelids sleepily a-droop; but his eyes, quick and watchful, scanned the deeper gloom of fence and dismal outbuilding, and he sat there very patient and very still. At last he stirred slightly, the cigarette quivered and was motionless again, for, amid the shadows, he had seen a dim shape that flitted swiftly toward him; on it came, creeping swift and silent beside the fence, nearer and nearer until it resolved itself into a slender form. Then Soapy spoke.

"Hello, Kid!"

Ensued a moment of tense silence, then Spike answered, his voice unnaturally thin and high-pitched.

"That — that you, Soapy?"

"'S right, Kid!"

"What you — doin' around — here?"

"Who, me? Y' see, I 'm kind o' yearnin' for that gun you got there — "

"Gun? I — I ain't got — no gun — "

"Well, Kid, I know Heine 's all kinds of a liar, but he tells me he 's loaned you one of his, an' so — " Soapy's long arm shot out in the gloom and seizing Spike's right arm he drew it near. "Why, Kid," said he, "it

kind o' looks like Heine told the truth for once by accident, don't it?"

"You leggo my wrist!"

"Right-o, Kid, right-o! Don't get peeved — "

"Well, leggo then!"

"Sure! Only this artillery ain't goin' t' be no good t' you t'night — ye see, Bud — ain't here! 'S rough on ye, Kid, 's rough, but he ain't!"

"W — what — d' ye mean?" stammered the boy.

"I mean as you comin' here t' plug holes in Bud's carcase it 's kind o' rough on you as there ain't goin' t' be no carcase here to plug. Y' see, Bud 's took his carcase up-town with him t'night — "

"You 're a liar, Soapy, a liar! Bud 's inside, I know he is. Leggo my arm, you can't con me!"

"'S right, Kid, I ain't tryin'. Only I 'm tellin' you Bud 's left me an' Lefty t' run things here t'night. Bud 's up-town at his old man's place. I know because — I sent him, see?"

"You sent him — you? Ah, come off! You could n't!"

"'S right, Kid; I got him away by a fake telegram."

The boy ventured a long, quivering sigh, his whole frame relaxed, and in that instant Soapy wrenched the weapon from his loosened hold and rose. Choking with passion, Spike sprang at him, but Soapy fended him off with a long arm.

"Gimme that gun!"

"Behave, Kid, behave, else I 'll have t' dot ye one! Be good an' chase off home; this ain't no place for you t'night — nor no other time."

"Gimme that gun!"

"No!"

Spike ceased the useless struggle and leaned against the fence, panting, while Soapy reseated himself upon the battered pail.

"What you got t' come buttin' in for?" demanded the boy, "this ain't your show, an' I guess you ain't so mighty fond o' Bud either — "

"'S right, too," nodded Soapy, "no, I ain't exactly fond of him, Kid; leastways I don't run t' help him if he falls nor kiss th' place t' make it well — no, Kid! But I kind o' feel that Bud 's too good t' snuff it this way, or snuff it — yet!"

"Good?" said the lad bitterly, "good — hell! He 's ruined me, Soapy, he 's done me in! He 's come between me an' — an' Hermy. He tried t' make me think dirt of her, an' now — now I — I 'm all alone; I ain't got nobody left — oh, my God!" and huddling to the fence, Spike broke out into a fierce and anguished sobbing, while Soapy, spinning the revolver dexterously on his finger, watched him under drooping lids.

"She was mighty good t' ye, Hermy was!" said he thoughtfully.

"Don't — ah, don't!" gasped Spike.

"An' when he spoke dirt of her, you — believed him, Kid!"

"I did n't."

"You did, else you 'd have been with her now. She was always good t' you, Hermy was, but you — well, you preferred Bud!"

"I did n't, Soapy; God knows I did n't — only — I thought Bud would make me a champion —"

"By gettin' ye soused, Kid!"

"Oh, I know — I know now he 's only been stringin' me all along — I know now it 's too late — that 's why I 'm goin' t' kill him."

"Kill him!" mused Soapy. "Kid, there 's good killin's an' bad killin's, an' I reckon this 'ud be a good killin', maybe. But this ain't your job."

"Why — why ain't it?"

"Well, you got a sister f'r one thing, an' besides, you ain't a killer."

"You gimme that gun an' see!" cried the lad, reaching out a hand tremulous and eager.

"When the time came, Kid, 'stead o' shootin', you 'd drop your gun like that time in th' wood."

"Th' wood!" Spike's voice dropped to a strangled whisper and he shrank back against the fence. "You — my God, you — saw —!"

"'S right, Kid, I was there! An' I 'm kind o' glad y' could n't do it, glad for your sister's sake. But what I 'm thinkin' is that maybe she thinks it was you — eh, Kid?"

Spike writhed and groaned.

"Eh, Kid?"

"Yes!"

"Why, then, if I was you, I 'd skin off right now an' put her wise; it may mean a whole lot t' her. Y' know where she is — go an' tell her, Kid."

"I can't! I can't — she don't want me no more, she 's done wi' me, I guess. I 'm — oh, I 'm too low-down an' rotten!"

"Sure!" nodded Soapy. "But she 's good, an' she 's a woman; an' good women are only made t' forgive, I reckon."

"But there 's Geoff! I — I could n't face Geoff."

"That 's because you think a heap too much about a low-down rotten guy called Spike. I guess it 's about time you began t' think about your sister f' a change. Well, s' long, Kid, I guess I 'll be movin'; this pail comes a bit sharp after an hour of it."

So saying, Soapy rose, nodded, and strolled away, still twirling the revolver upon that long and dexterous finger. For a moment Spike stood looking after him, then, chin on breast, turned and went his solitary way across the desolate waste. But now it was Soapy who, pausing, turned to watch him safe out of sight. Scarcely had the sound of Spike's departure died away than a door opened and closed hard by, and heavy steps approached, halted suddenly, and a hoarse voice demanded:

"Who 's there?"

"Why, this is me, Bud."

"What th' hell are ye hangin' around out here for?" questioned M'Ginnis suspiciously.

"Countin' th' stars, Bud, an' doin' th' Providence act — 'midst of life we are in death' gag — "

"Aw, cut out that slush an' hike along t' Rayner's wi' me; I got a job for you an' Heine — "

Side by side they crossed the gloomy, open lot until they were come beneath a lamp at a certain bleak street corner. Here Soapy paused and held out his hand, open to the light.

"This don't happen t' be your ring, Bud? " he enquired lazily.

M'Ginnis glanced at the ring upon that narrow palm, a ring wrought into the semblance of two hands that clasped each other, looked closer, drew in his breath suddenly, then straightened his shoulders and threw back his head.

"No! " he answered, frowning into Soapy's imperturbable face, "what th' hell made you think it was? "

"Why, ye see, Bud, it happens t' have your name scratched inside it, that's all. But if it ain't yours, it ain't! " And speaking, Soapy tossed the ring back over his shoulder far out into the open lot.

For a long moment M'Ginnis stood motionless, staring back at that desolate plot of ground; when at last he glanced toward his companion, Soapy was lighting a fresh cigarette.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE OLD UN ADVISES AND RAVENSLEE ACTS

In the rose garden was an arbour smothered in riotous bloom, and in the arbour was a divan, wide and low and voluptuously soft, meet for the repose of an invalid on a languorous afternoon, or indeed any other time. But just now the invalid reposed not at all but sat, elbow on knee and square chin on fist, very lonely and therefore very grim.

All about him roses bloomed, filling the air with their sweetness, but he had no eyes for their beauty; upon the table within reach of his hand were books and magazines, but he was in no mood for reading; clasped between strong white teeth he held his favourite pipe unlighted and cold, for tobacco had for him no savour. So he sat and scowled at the universe in general, and in particular at a robin that had boldly ventured near and was regarding him with a very round, bright eye.

"She 's avoiding me!" said Ravenslee bitterly, teeth clenched upon his pipestem, "there 's no doubt about it, damn it; she 's avoiding me! And she 's not happy here either!"

The robin turned his head to regard the speaker with his other eye, then fluttered his wings and flew away as the lazy quiet of the afternoon was broken by the squeak of shoe leather, and glancing up, Ravenslee beheld the Old Un.

"What cheer, Guv," said he, "greetin's doo and how 's the invalid?"

"Invalid!" repeated Ravenslee, scowling again, "I 'm no invalid!"

"Spoke like a true-bred gamecock, s' help me!"

"I 'm as right as rain physically, Old Un, but — "

"Talkin' o' physic, Guv," said the old man, seating himself and nodding brightly, "talkin' o' physic, the physic as set you on your pins again was love, Guv, love!"

"But it so happens — "

"Wait a bit, I ain't done, Guv! 'Ere 's me, a old cove as 'as lived 'ears an' 'ears an' 'ears an' 'ears longer 'n you, so nacherally I 'm a powerful lot fuller o' th' wisdom o' life than you, specially in matters o' th' 'eart, Guv. Now me, 'avin' 'elped you into th' matrimonial ring, as you might say, 'ave took your 'appiness under my wing, an', Guv, I don't like the way you 're shapin' — "

"But you see — "

"'Old 'ard, Guv, let a pore old cove get a word in for a change. Now there 's you an' 'er, your fair young spouse, both up to each other's weight, sound in wind an' limb an' meant for j'y — what I want is t' see you come to a clinch! This ain't no time for sparrin' an' out-fightin' — yet 'ere you are a-feintin' at each other from opposite corners — "

"But — "

"'Arf a mo', Guv, 'arf a mo' — gimme a chance for a occasional word! An' don't frown, Guv, don't frown at a pore old cove; y' see, there 's jest three blokes in this 'ard world as my old 'eart warms to, an' one on 'em 's Joe, an' t' other un 's you, an' t' other un 's 'er — which ain't a bloke. Lord, Guv, what a soft armful o' beauty! 'Ow warm an' cuddlesome! Oh, Guv, what a waist! What lips! What — "

"Old Un, for heaven's sake, shut up! D' you think I 'm blind? D' you think — "

"Guv, I dunno wot t' think! 'Ere 's you with your 'ead in your 'ands, an' there 's 'er sighin' an' sighin' — "

"Sighing? Where? When? Why — "

"Sighin' an' sighin', Guv, so soft an' pretty — I 'eard 'er! Also she wep' — I seen 'er."

"Where? "

"An' 'er tears, Guv, them pearly tears went t' my 'eart — an' nobody t' put a arm round that waist, nor kiss them sweet lips, nor soothe them tears away —

'Oh, alone she sat sighin' by a green willer tree,
With 'er 'and on 'er bosom, 'er 'ead on 'er knee,
Weepin' willer, willer, willer my garlan' shall be.'

So, Guv, I ax you, man to man, why, oh, why are ye neglectin' your fair young spouse? An', Guv, I only ax because your 'appiness an' 'ers is mine — s' 'elp me!"

"How if it 's the other way about, Old Un? Suppose she avoids me?"

"Why lumme, Guv! 'T is a sure sign she needs persoot. Remember this:

'I'm as would lovely woman woo
'E lovely woman must persoo,
For if 'e don't, 't is plain as plain
That feller 'e will woo in vain.'

An', Guv, I 've only took th' liberty o' sayin' this because my pore old bowels yearns to ye — both on ye. Persoot 's the word, Guv, per-soot!"

The Old Un nodded, rose, and creaked away, and Ravenslee, looking after him, scowled no longer, but rising, sauntered across the trim garden to where there was a lily pool and, leaning over the marble rim, stared down into the placid water.

Now as the Old Un went his way, there met him a little girl, very neat and tidy, who sang to herself in a small happy voice and tapped along on a crutch; but beholding the Old Un, his dazzling shoes, his rakish hat, she stood silent all at once, glancing up wistfully into that fierce, battered old face.

"Lumme — crutches!" he exclaimed.

"No, please — only one, sir!" she answered, dropping him a little, old-fashioned curtsey.

"Crikey!" said he, staring, "so young, so tender, an' — a game leg! A little angel wi' a broke wing — lumme!"

So Age and Youth stared at each other and she, being

a child, was quick to heed that the eyes so bright beneath their hoary brows were kindly eyes, and the smile upon the grim old mouth was very reassuring, wherefore she smiled also.

"Only one crutch, sir," she repeated. "An' the doctor says as I won't want it much longer, sir." Here, dropping another curtsey, she held up for his acceptance a bunch of wild flowers.

"What — f' me, little maid?" he enquired.

"Yes, please, sir."

"Why bless — bless your lovin' little 'eart!" quavered the old man, and stooped to touch her rosy cheek with a hand gnarled and scarred with much hard punching, yet a very gentle hand indeed. "God bless that little game leg, but pretty flowers 'ud be wasted on a old bloke like me. You take 'em to th' Guv, see — over there — that tall chap leanin' over th' pool. But first gimme a — a kiss instead, will ye, little lass?"

"I 'd like to, sir."

And when the Old Un had kissed and been kissed right heartily, he pointed to Ravenslee's distant, lounging figure, winked, nodded, and squeaked away.

Thus it was that Ravenslee, absorbed in thought, was presently roused by the quick light tapping of the little crutch and glanced up.

"Oh!" she cried softly; the flowers fell and lay neglected as, clasping her hands, she stared up at him in radiant-eyed wonder.

"Welcome, Highness!" said he and bowed.

"Oh, it 's the Prince — my dear Prince! Oh, Goody!" and she hastened toward him, then stopped all at once, puzzled and abashed because of his elegant attire. Perceiving which he reached out and drew her down by him on the marble seat beside the pool.

"Why this sudden change of demeanour, Princess?" he enquired. "What 's the matter?"

"You 're — you 're so different, sir — so different an' grand in all them cute clo'es, sir."

"Am I, dear? But I'm just the same inside, you know. And, for heaven's sake, Princess, do not call me 'sir.'"

"But the big gentleman that belongs here an' has all these lovely flowers an' everything — he says as I must always say 'sir.'"

"Big gentleman?"

"Yes, the big, soft gentleman with the cute little curls on his cheeks."

"Oh — him!" said Ravenslee, laughing suddenly. "Indeed a very just description, Princess. But you don't have to worry about him any more; he 's gone."

"Gone? For good?"

"For very good indeed!"

"Does n't all this beautiful, beautiful place belong t' him any more?"

"Never any more."

"Have you come here 'stead of him? Come t' stay?"

"Yes."

"An' can I pick a rose t' kiss sometimes?"

"As many as you like."

"Oh!" sighed the child rapturously, nestling within his arm, "is n't that just — fine! I guess this sure is the Beautiful City of Perhaps, after all!"

"I wonder?"

"Oh, but I 'm sure it is — now th' gentleman 's gone I just know it is!"

"What makes you so sure?"

"Everything! 'Cause you see, Prince, my daddy don't have t' be away all day any more. An' mumsey don't have t' sew late, nights, any more. An' when we came into the cute little house where we live — there was the doll that says 'mamma' jest waitin' f' me. An' there was a big box o' candies, an' a doll carriage with real rubber on th' wheels — jest like we used to talk about. So you see this must be Perhaps at last, an' I 'm so — so happy — only —" Hazel sighed.

"Only what?"

"I do wish Hermy could find her way here too; she used t' be so tired sometimes."

"You mean that you would like to find Princess Nobody, I guess."

"Oh, but I can't! I used to look an' look for her every day 'til th' gentleman said she was n't here, an' told me never t' come near th' big house any more."

"But he 's gone, and you never had me to help you."

"Oh, will you — will you help me right now?" she pleaded.

"Surest thing you know!" he nodded, "your hand, Princess."

So hand in hand he led her, suiting his long legs to hers, along shady walks, up terrace steps, across smooth lawns, and so to the great house. Hazel paused to question him further concerning "the gentleman", but Ravenslee laughed and, seating her upon his shoulder, bore her into the house.

In her housekeeper's room, surrounded by many dusty bill files and stacks of account books, they presently found Mrs. Trapes, whose hawk's-eye viewed bills and tradesmen's books while she frowned and muttered such comments as "Rogues!" "Thieves!" "Scand'lous!" "Wicked!" Until glancing up, her sharp features softened, and she smiled up into the child's happy face.

"So Hazel 's found ye, has she, Mr. Geoffrey. An' talkin' o' her, you 've sure made the Bowkers a happy fam'ly. But, my land, Mr. Ravenslee, the scand'lous prices as th' tradespeople has been allowed t' charge you these last six months! Here 's th' butcher — listen t' this —"

"Heaven forbid, Mrs. Trapes! Rather let that butcher listen to you, miserable wretch!"

"An' there 's the milkman — that milkman's cows ought t' blush at th' sound o' your name! Here 's his accounts for the last six months, an' I 've found —"

"Have you, Mrs. Trapes? We 're trying to find Hermione — where is she?"

"Oh, she 's in her room — laying down, I guess."

"Not," enquired Ravenslee, "not — er — in bed, is she?"

"Mr. Geoffrey, I don't know; I 'm busy. Go an' see for yourself — she 's your wife, ain't she?"

"Why, since you ask, I — er — hardly know," he answered a little ruefully, "anyway, found she shall be."

With the child perched upon his shoulder he strode up-stairs and along wide corridors whose deep carpets gave forth no sound, and so reached a certain door. Here he hesitated a moment, then knocked with imperious hand.

"Come in!" called that voice whose soft inflection had always thrilled him, but never as it did now as, turning the handle, he entered his wife's chamber.

Hermione was standing before a long mirror, and she neither turned nor looked from the radiant vision it reflected; her eyes, her attention, all the feminine soul of her being just then fixed and centered upon the tea gown she was trying on; such a garment as she had gloated over in the store windows, yearned for, but never thought to possess.

"Ann," she sighed, "oh, Ann, is n't it exquisite! Is n't it a perfect dream! Of course it needs a wee bit of alteration here and there, but I can do that. Is n't it good of him to have bought it without saying a word! And there are heaps of dresses and robes and — and everything! A complete trousseau, Ann, dear — think of it! I wonder how he knew my size —"

"Oh, I just guessed it, my dear," answered Ravenslee in the voice of a much experienced husband.

Hermione gasped, and turning, stared at him wide-eyed, seeing only him, conscious only of him. Lifting Hazel to the floor, he seated himself upon her bed and, crossing his legs, eyed her flushed loveliness with a matter-of-fact air. "Really," he continued, "I don't see that it needs any alteration; perhaps the sleeves might be a trifle shorter — show a little more arm. But those flounces and

things are perfect! I hope all the other things fit as well?"

Hermione flushed deeper still and caught her breath.

"Oh, Hermy," said a soft, pleading little voice, "won't you see me, please?"

Hermione started, her long lashes drooped suddenly, and then — then, forgetful of costly lace, of dainty ruffles and ribbons, she was on her knees and had the child close in her arms. And beholding the clasp of those round, white arms, the lovely, down-bent head, and all the tender, craving, inborn motherhood of her, Ravenslee held his breath, and into his eyes came a light of reverent adoration.

Presently he rose and left them together, but as he went, the light was in his eyes still.

CHAPTER XL

CONCERNING A HANDFUL OF PEBBLES

"And so," said Hermione, as she waved good-by to Hazel, who stood in the cottage doorway with Mrs. Bowker — a Mrs. Bowker no longer faded, "you did n't forget even the doll that says 'Mamma'?"

"It was such a little thing!" he answered.

"What a — man you are!" she said softly.

"Just that, Hermione," he answered, "and — frightfully human!" She was silent. "Do you know what I mean?" he demanded, glancing at her averted face.

"Yes!" she answered, without looking around. So they walked for awhile in silence. Suddenly he seized her hand and drew it through his arm.

"Hermione," he said gently, "I want my wife."

She still kept her head averted, but he could feel how she was trembling.

"And you think — " she began softly.

"That I have been patient long enough. I have waited and hoped because — "

"Because you are so generous, so kind — such a man!" she said softly and with head still averted.

"And yet since I have been well again, you have kept me at arm's length. Dear, you — love me still, don't you?"

"Love you?" she repeated, "love you?" For a moment she turned and looked up at him then drew her arm from his and walked on with head averted once more. So they entered the rose garden and coming to the lily pool leaned there side by side.

"Hermione," said he, staring down into the water, "if you really love me, why do you hate to kiss me? Why do you hardly suffer me to touch you? And you've never even called me by my name, that I remember!"

"Geoffrey!" she breathed; "and I — love you to touch me! And I don't hate to kiss you, Geoffrey dear."

"Then why do you keep me at arm's length?"

"Do I?" she questioned softly, gazing down at the lily pads.

"You know you do. Why?"

"Well — because."

"Because what?"

"Oh, well, just — because."

"Hermione — tell me."

"Well, everything is so strange — so unreal! This great house, the servants, all the beautiful clothes you bought me! To have so very much of everything after having to do with so very little — it's all so wonderful and — dreadful!"

"Dreadful?"

"You are so — dreadfully rich!"

"Is that the reason you keep me at such a distance? Is that why you avoid me?"

"Avoid you?"

"Yes, dear. You've done it very sweetly and delicately, but you have avoided me lately. Why?"

Hermione didn't answer.

"And you haven't touched any of the monthly allowance I make you," he went on, frowning a little, "not one cent. Why, Hermione?"

Hermione was silent.

"Tell me!"

Still she was silent, only she bent lower above the pool and drew further from him, whereat his pale cheek flushed, and his frown grew blacker.

And presently, as he scowled down into the water, she stole a look at him, and when she spoke, though the words were light, the quiver in her voice belied them.

"Invalid, dear, if you want to be angry with me, wait — till you 're a little stronger."

Ravenslee stooped and picked up a handful of small pebbles that chanced to lie loose.

"Wife, dear," said he, "I 'm as well and strong as ever I was. But I 've asked you several questions which I mean you to answer, so I am going to give you until I have pitched all these pebbles into the water, and then —" Hermione glanced up swiftly.

"Then?" she questioned.

"Why then, if you have n't answered, I shall — take matters into my own hands. One!" and a pebble splashed into the pool.

"What do you want to know?"

"Two! Why have n't you condescended to take your allowance?"

"Dear, I — I did n't need it, and even if I had, I — oh, I could n't take it — yet!"

"Three! Why not?"

"Because you have given me so much already, and I — have given you — nothing."

"Four! Why — have n't you?"

"Oh — well — because!"

"Five! What does 'because' mean, this time?"

"It means — just — because!"

"Six! Seven! Eight! Why have you avoided me lately?"

Hermione was silent, watching him with troubled eyes while he slowly pitched the pebbles into the pool, counting as they fell.

"Nine! Ten! Eleven! Twelve! Why do you keep me at arm's length?"

"I don't — I — I — you won't let me —" she said a little breathlessly, while one by one he let the pebbles fall into the pool, counting inexorably as they fell.

"Thirteen! Fourteen, fifteen — and that 's the last!" As he spoke he turned toward her, and she, reading something of his purpose in his eyes, turned to flee, felt his

long arms about her, felt herself swung up and up and so lay crushed and submissive in his fierce embrace as he turned and began to bear her across the garden. Then, being helpless, she began to plead with him.

"Ah, don't, don't — dear! Geoffrey! Put me down! Where are you taking me? If any one sees us — "

"Let them!" he muttered grimly; "you 're my wife!"

So he bore her across the garden into the arbour and laying her upon the divan, sank beside it on his knees, panting a little.

"A little weak — still!" said he, "but not so bad — you 're no scraggy sylph, thank heaven! Hermione — look at me!" But she turned and hid her face against him, for his clasp was close about her still. So he stooped and kissed her hair, her glowing cheek, her soft white neck, and, in that instant — wonder of wonders — her arms were around him, strong, passionate arms that clung and drew him close — then strove wildly to hold him away.

"Loose me!" she cried, "let me go! Geoffrey — husband, be generous and let me go!" But he lifted her head, back and back across his arm until beneath her long lashes her eyes looked into his.

"Hermione, when will you — be my wife?"

Against him he could feel the sweet hurry of her breathing, and stooping he spoke again, lip to lip:

"Hermione, when will you be my wife?"

But, even while he kissed her, between those quivering, parted lips came a murmur of passionate prayer and pleading.

"Oh, my love, wait — wait! Let me tell you — ah, loose me and let me tell you."

Slowly his hold relaxed, and, twisting in his arms, she slipped upon her knees beside him, and, crouching close, hid her face against him.

"Beloved," she whispered quickly, breathlessly, "oh, dear man that I love so — there is something between us, a shadow of shame and horror that is with me day and night and always must be. While you lay sick it was

there, torturing me with every moan and sigh you uttered. It is with me wherever I go — it is between us now — yes, now — even while I strain you in my arms like this. I have watched you grow strong and well again, I 've seen the love in your eyes, and I 've yearned to be to you — all you would have me, but because of this shadow I — dare not. Ah, God, how can I be wife to you when — let this answer for me." And she placed in Ravenslee's hand a coat button whereto a piece of cloth adhered. "Dear love, I saw you throw it away," she explained, "and I searched and searched until I found it."

"Why?"

"Because I knew you would soon ask me — this question, and I have kept it for my answer. Ah, God! how can I be wife to you when my brother would have killed you — murdered you!"

Ravenslee hurled the button far away, then lifting Hermione's bowed head, spoke very tenderly.

"How does all this affect our love, Hermione, except to show me you are even sweeter and nobler than I had thought. And as for the shadow, it is — only a shadow after all."

"But it is my shame!" she answered. "You might have had for wife the sister of a thief, but not — oh, God! not the sister of a would-be murderer. If — if I came to you now, I should come in shame — Ah, Geoffrey, don't — shame me!"

"God forbid!" he muttered.

Close, close she clasped him, hiding her face against him, kissing and kissing the rough cloth of his coat.

"Oh, Geoffrey," she murmured, "how we do love each other!"

"So much, Hermione, that I will never — claim you until you are ready to come to me of your own will. But, dear, I am only a man — how long must I wait?"

"Give me time," she pleaded, "with time the horror may grow less. Let me go away for awhile — a little while. Let me find Arthur — "

"No," he answered, frowning, "you shan't do that; there will be no need — to-morrow I go to fetch him."

"To bring him — here?"

"Why, of course. You see, I intend him to go to college."

Hermione rose and coming to the entrance of the arbour leaned there.

"Why, Hermione — dear love — you 're crying! What is it?"

"Nothing," she answered, bowing her face upon her arm, "only — I think — if you ask me again — I can't — keep you — waiting — very long!"

CHAPTER XLI

OF A PACKET OF LETTERS

M'Ginnis jerked aside the roll-top desk and falling on his knees before a small but massive safe built into the wall behind, set the combination and swung open the heavy door, talking to his companion as he did so and quite unconscious of the pale face that watched him through the dingy window.

"That dam' Soapy 's gettin' ugly," he was saying, "an' it don't do t' get ugly with me, Heine, boy! Soapy thinks he 's smart Alec all right, but I guess I 'm some smarter. Why, I got evidence enough in here t' 'lectrocute a dozen Soapys."

"So?" said Heine, chewing on his cigar and peering into the safe. "Say, what 's all them tied up in sassy blue ribbon, Bud?"

"These?" said M'Ginnis, and he took out a bundle of letters, turning them over in his big hands.

"Skirt — hey, Bud?"

"Sure thing!" he nodded, and as he stared down at this packet, how should he know how tense and rigid had become the lounging form in the darkness beyond the window, or guess of the wide glare of watchful eyes or of the sudden quiver of a smouldering cigarette?

"Yes, a girl's letters, Heine! An' a hell of a lot of 'em. I dunno why I keep 'em, but — oh, hell!" So saying he tossed the letters back again and turned to his companion. "Hand over that dope!" he commanded, and Heine passed over a bundle of papers which M'Ginnis carefully slipped into a certain compartment. As he did so, Heine spun around upon his heel.

"Gee whiz!" he exclaimed, "you shook me that time, Soapy! Where 've you blown in from — "

"An' what th' hell are you nosin' around here for, anyway?" snarled M'Ginnis, shutting the heavy safe with a fierce slam; "since you 've come in you can get out again — right now!"

Soapy seated himself upon a corner of the desk and placidly breathed out two spirals of cigarette smoke.

"Heard about Hermy bein' married, Bud?" he enquired.

"Married? You 're a liar! Hermy married? It 's not so!"

"'S right!" nodded Soapy. "She 's married th' millionaire guy as got shot — you know — got shot in that wood — you 'll remember, Bud!"

M'Ginnis sank into a chair and fell to biting his nails, staring blindly before him.

"Is — this — straight goods?" he enquired thickly, without altering his gaze.

"Sure! Y' see, she nursed him through his sickness, Bud — kind of did the piller-smoothin' an' brow-strokin' act. Oh, I guess she comforted him quite some."

M'Ginnis stared before him, worrying his nails with sharp white teeth.

"Ravenslee 's a well man again, I hear, an' they 're honeymoonin' at his place on the Hudson — devotion ain't the word, Bud! 'S funny," said Soapy, "but th' bullet as downed this guy drove Hermy into his arms. 'S funny, ain't it, Bud?"

With a hoarse, inarticulate cry that was scarcely human, M'Ginnis sprang from his chair, his quivering fists upflung. For a moment he stood thus, striving vainly for utterance, then wrenched loose his neckerchief, while Soapy methodically lighted a new cigarette from the butt of its predecessor.

"Easy, Bud, easy!" he remonstrated gently, when M'Ginnis's torrent of frenzied threats and curses had died down somewhat. "If you go on that way, you 'll go off —

in a fit or somethin', an' I should n't like t' see ye die — that way!"

"Up the river, is he?" panted M'Ginnis.

"'S right, Bud, up the river in his big house — with her. I — "

"Is he, by — "

"A dandy place f' honeymoonin', Bud!"

"Loan me your gun, Soapy. I 'll get him, by God! if I have t' shoot him in her arms — loan me y'r gun!"

"I guess not, Bud, no, I guess not. I 'd feel kind o' lonesome without th' feel of it. Ask Heine; he 'll loan you his; it 's gettin' t' be quite a habit with him, ain't it, Heine?"

M'Ginnis sat awhile glaring down at his clutching right hand, then he rose, opened his desk, and took thence a heavy revolver, and slipped it inside his coat.

"You 're comin' with me, Heine," said he, "I 'll want you."

"Sure thing, Bud," nodded Heine, chewing his cigar. "But what about lettin' Soapy tag along too."

"Soapy," said M'Ginnis, striding to the door, "Soapy can go t' hell right now."

"Why then, Bud," drawled Soapy, "I 'll sure meet you — later. S' long."

Left alone, Soapy's languor gave place to swift action. In two strides, it seemed, he was in the saloon, had beckoned the quick-eyed bartender aside and put the question: "Where 's the Kid, Jake?"

The bartender lifted an eyebrow and jerked a thumb upward.

"Shut-eye," he nodded, and turned back to his multifarious duties.

Up a narrow stair sped Soapy and, opening one of the numerous doors, crossed to a truckle bed wherefrom a tousled head upreared itself.

"Who th' — "

"Say, Kid, are ye drunk or only asleep?"

"What yer want, Soapy? You lemme be — what yer want?" began Spike drowsily.

"Nothin' much, Kid, only Bud an' Heine 's gone t' shoot up y'r sister's husband."

"Husband!" cried Spike, drowsy no longer. "Husband — say, d' ye mean Geoff?"

"That 's who, Kid. You was crackin' on t' me about wantin' t' make good; well, here 's y'r chance. Bud aims t' get there 'bout midnight — up th' river, you know — so you got two hours. You 'll have t' go some t' get in first, but I guess you can do it."

"I will if it kills me!" cried Spike, springing toward the door.

"Hold on, Kid, you 'll need some mazuma, maybe. Here 's a ten-spot. It 'll be more useful t' you than me after t'night, I reckon. So get your hooks on to it, an' now — beat it!"

Without more words Spike snatched the money, crammed it into his pocket and, running down the stairs, was gone.

Then, after having lighted another cigarette, Soapy descended to M'Ginnis's dingy office, where having dragged away the desk, he brought a chair and sat with his ear against the safe, turning the combination lock with long, delicate fingers. To and fro he turned it, very patiently hearkening to the soft clicks the mechanism gave forth while the cigarette smouldered between his pallid lips. Soapy, among other accomplishments, was a yeggman renowned in the profession, and very soon the heavy door swung softly back, and Soapy became lost in study. Money there was and valuables of many kinds, and these he did n't trouble with, but to the papers he gave a scrupulous attention; sometimes as he read his white eyelids fluttered somewhat, and sometimes the dangling cigarette quivered. Presently he arose and bore these many papers to the sheet iron upon which stood the rusty stove; here he piled them and set them alight and stood watching until they were reduced to a heap of charred ash. Then, returning to the safe, he took out a bundle of letters tied up in a faded blue ribbon, and seating himself at M'Gin-

nis's desk, he slipped off the ribbon and very methodically began to read these letters one after the other.

But as he read the humble entreaties, the passionate pleading of those written words, blotted and smeared with the bitter tears of a woman's poignant shame and anguish, Soapy's pendent cigarette fell to the floor and lay there smouldering and forgotten, and his lips were drawn back from sharp, white teeth — pallid lips contorted in a grin the more awful because of the great drops that welled from the fierce, half-closed eyes. Every letter he read and every word, then very methodically set them back within the faded blue ribbon and sat staring down at them with eyes wider open than usual — eyes that saw back into the past. And as he sat thus, staring at what had been, he repeated a sentence to himself over and over again at regular intervals, speaking with a soft inflection none had ever heard from him before:

"Poor little Maggie — poor little kid!"

CHAPTER XLII

TELLS HOW RAVENSLEE BROKE HIS WORD AND WHY

"Past eleven o'clock, dear," said Hermione.

"Still so early?" sighed Ravenslee.

They were sitting alone in the fire glow, so near that by moving his hand he could touch her where she sat curled up in the great armchair; but he did not reach out his hand because they were alone and in the fire glow, and Hermione had never seemed quite so alluring.

"How cosy a fire is — and how unnecessary!" she sighed contentedly.

"I 'm English enough to love a fire, especially when it is unnecessary," he answered.

"English, dear?"

"My mother was English; that 's why I was educated in England."

"Your mother! How she must have loved you!"

"I suppose she did; but, you see, she died when I was a baby."

"Poor lonely mite!" Here her hand came out impulsively to caress his coat sleeve and to be prisoned there by two other hands, to be lifted and pressed to burning lips, whereat she grew all rosy in the fire glow.

"I suppose," said he, the words coming a little unevenly, "it would be too much to ask my wife to — come a little — nearer?"

"Nearer? Why, Geoffrey, dear, our chairs are touching now."

"Our chairs? Why, yes — so they are! I suppose," sighed he, "I suppose it would be breaking my word to my wife if I happened to — kiss my wife?"

"Why, Geoffrey — of course it would!"

"Yes, I feared so!" he nodded and kissed her hand instead, and there fell a silence.

"How heavenly it is!" she whispered softly, leaning a little nearer to him.

"Heavenly!" he answered, leaning a little nearer to her and watching the droop of her lashes.

"So — so quiet and — peaceful!" she added, drawing away again, conscious of his look.

"Horribly!" he sighed.

"Geoffrey!"

"Quiet and peace," he explained, "may hold such an infinitude of possibilities impossible of realisation to a husband who is bound by promises, that it is apt to be a little — trying."

Hermione did n't speak but drew his hand to be caressed by the soft oval of a cheek and touched by the velvet of shy lips.

"And yet," he went on, staring resolutely at the fire, "I would n't change — this, for anything else the world could offer me!"

"Bear with me — a little longer, dear!" she murmured.

"As long as you will, Hermione — providing — "

"Well, my Geoffrey, dear?"

"That it is only — a little longer."

"You don't think I 'm very — silly, do you, dear?" she enquired, staring into the fire.

"No, not very!"

"Oh!" she said softly, glancing at him reproachfully. "You don't think me — cruel?"

"Not very," he answered, kissing her hand again.

"Dear Geoffrey, you don't think I 'm very selfish, do you?" she questioned wistfully.

"No — never that!" he answered, keeping his gaze averted.

"Because if — "

"If?" said he.

"If it is hard for you — " the soft voice faltered.

"Yes, Hermione?"

"If you really think I 'm — cruel and — silly, you — need n't wait — any longer — if you wish — "

His arms were about her, drawing her near, clasping her ever closer, and she held him away no more, but — beholding her wistful eyes, the plaintive droop of her vivid mouth, and all the voiceless pleading of her, he loosed her and turned away.

"I love you so much — Hermione, so much, that your will shall be my will."

She rose, and leaning against the carved mantel stared down into the fire; when at last she spoke, there was a note in her voice he had never heard before.

"Geoffrey, dear, this world is a very bad world for a lonely girl, and sometimes a very hateful world, and I have been lonely nearly all my life — and I did n't think there were such men as you; I did n't think any man could love so unselfishly. All my life I shall — treasure the recollection of this hour — yes, always! always!"

Then she turned and, ere he knew, was on her knees before him, had twined soft arms about his neck, and was looking up at him through shining tears.

"Yes, I 'm — crying a little! I don't do it often, dear — tears don't easily come with me. But now I 'm crying because — oh, because I 'm so proud — so proud to have won such a wonderful love. Good night — good night! Oh, break your word for once — kiss me, my husband!"

So while she knelt to him thus, he kissed her until she sighed and stirred in his embrace. Then she rose and hand in hand they crossed the room and he opened the door; for a blissful moment they stood there silent in the shadows, but when he would have kissed her again she laughed at him through her tears and fled from him up the wide stairway.

CHAPTER XLIII

HOW SPIKE GOT EVEN

A CLOCK in the hall without struck midnight, but Ravenslee sat on long after the silvery chime had died away, his chin sunk on broad chest, his eyes staring blindly at the fading embers, lost in profound but joyful meditation; once he turned to look where she had stood beside the mantel, and once he reached out to touch the thrice-blessed chair that had held her.

The curtains stirred and rustled at the open window behind him, but he sat looking into the flickering fire, seeing there pictures of the future, and the future was full of a happiness beyond words, for in every picture Hermione moved.

All at once he started and glanced swiftly around, his lounging attitude changing to one of watchful alertness, for he had heard a sound that drew rapidly nearer — the hiss and pant of breath drawn in quick gasps. Silently he arose and turned to see the curtains swing apart and a shapeless something stagger forward and fall heavily. Then he reached out to the switch beside the hearth, and the room was flooded with brilliant light; the figure kneeling just inside the swaying curtains uttered a strangled cry and threw up a hand before his face, a hand dark with spattering blood.

"Oh, Geoff — oh, Geoff!" panted Spike, "I ain't — come thievin' this time — honest t' God, I ain't!"

"Why, you 're hurt — what 's the matter?"

"They see me down th' road as I came an' shot me, but this ain't nothin'. Out th' lights, Geoff — out 'em — quick!"

But Ravenslee had crossed the room, had seized the lad's arm, and was examining the ugly graze that bled so freely.

"That ain't nothin' — douse th' lights, Geoff — out 'em quick. Bud 's coming here close behind — Bud an' Heine — they mean t' plug you — oh, put out th' lights — "

Instinctively Ravenslee turned, but even as he did so Spike uttered a hoarse cry.

"No, ye don't, Bud — not this time, by God!" and sprang upon the form that towered between the curtains; came the sound of fierce scuffling, a deafening report, and running forward, Ravenslee caught Spike as he staggered back; heard a rush and trample of feet along the terrace, the sound of blows and fierce curses behind the swaying curtains, heard the Spider's fierce shout and Joe's deep roar, two more shots in rapid succession, and the swift patter of feet in flight and pursuit.

"How is it, Spike? Are you hurt, old chap?"

But Spike just then was beyond words, so Ravenslee bore the swooning boy to a settee, and laying him there, began to search hastily for the wound.

But now the door was flung wide and Hermione was beside him.

"Geoffrey — oh, my love! Have they hurt you?"

"No, dear — thanks to Spike, here!"

"Arthur! Oh, thank God — did he —?"

"Took the bullet meant for me, Hermione. I owe your brother my life!"

She was down on her knees and very soon her skilful fingers had laid bare the ugly wound in the lad's white arm. But now came Mrs. Trapes, looking taller and bonier than ever in a long, very woolly garment, and while she aided Hermione to bandage the wound, Ravenslee brought water and brandy, and very soon Spike sighed and opened his eyes.

"Hello, Hermy!" he said faintly. "Don't worry, I 'm all O. K. Bud shot me an' I 'm glad, because now I

can ask you t' forgive me. Y' see, he 'd have got old Geoff sure if it had n't been for me, so you — you will forgive me, won't you? "

For answer Hermione bent and kissed his pallid cheek.

" I 'll go and 'phone for the doctor," said Ravenslee.

" Which," said Mrs. Trapes, " I done ten minutes ago, Mr. Geoffrey. Doctor 'll be right along."

Ravenslee turned to Spike.

" How are you now, old fellow? "

" Only a bit sick, like. But say, Geoff — I know I played it low down on you, but — will you — shake an' try t' forget? "

Ravenslee took and held the boy's outstretched hand.

" I think we 're going to be better friends than ever, Spike! "

" Good! " said Spike, smiling wearily, " but say, Geoff — dear old Geoff — if I got t' die I don't mind — because I guess this makes us quits at last — don't it, Geoff? "

CHAPTER XLIV

RETRIBUTION

Half-stunned by a blow from Joe's mighty fist, M'Ginnis saw Heine felled by Spider, who, having promptly and scientifically kicked him unconscious, snatched the revolver from his lax fingers and turned to pursue. As he came M'Ginnis fired rapidly but, dazed by the blow, his aim was wild, so he turned and ran, with the Spider in hot pursuit. The moon was down, and it was very dark, and soon M'Ginnis found himself in the denser gloom of trees. On he ran, twisting and doubling, on and on, until spent and breathless, he paused to hearken. Far away, voices shouted to each other, voices that gradually grew more distant; so, finally having caught his breath, M'Ginnis went on again. But the wood was full of noises — strange rustling and sudden, soft night sounds — and at every sound the fugitive paused to listen, finger on trigger. And ever as he went the wild blood throbbed and pulsed within his brain, sounding now like the pad-pad of pursuing feet that would not be shaken off, and again like a voice that mumbled and muttered querulous words in the air about him, and at such times he glanced around upon the dark, but the words would not be stilled:

"She 's married — married — married! You drove her into his arms — you did — you did — you did! And he 's alive still and with her, alive — alive — alive!"

And sometimes as he stumbled along through that place of gloom, he cursed bitterly beneath his breath, and sometimes he ground sweating jaws since needs must he hearken to that taunting devil-voice:

"Alive and with his wife beside him — alive! And yours the fault — yours — yours! Your shot at Spike so near the house lost you the game — lost — lost! Your shot at Spike was a call for help — saved the life of the man you came to kill! Your shot at Spike lost you the game — lost — lost!"

So, followed by the pad-pad of running feet, haunted by the querulous demon-voice, M'Ginnis stumbled out upon the road — a lonely road at most times but quite desolate at this hour. The fugitive hastened along, dogged by sounds that none but he might hear, yet to him these sounds were dreadfully real, so real that once, goaded to a paroxysm of blind fury, he whirled about and fired wildly — a shot that seemed to split asunder the deep night silence, filling it with a thousand echoes. Once more he turned and ran, ran until his breath laboured painfully and the sweat ran from him, but ever the sounds were close about him.

At last he beheld lights that moved, and reaching a wayside halt, clambered aboard a late trolley and crouched as far from the light as possible. But even so, his disordered dress, his pallor, and the wild glare of his eyes drew the idle glances of the few passengers.

"Looks like you 'd been through th' mill, bo!" said one, a great, rough fellow; but meeting M'Ginnis's answering glare, he quailed and shrank away.

Dawn was at hand when at last he reached O'Rourke's saloon and, letting himself in, strode into the bar. The place was deserted at this hour, but from a room hard by came the sound of voices, hoarse laughter, and the rattle of chips that told a poker game was still in progress.

Scowling, M'Ginnis stood awhile to listen. Then, lifting the flap of the bar, he passed through the narrow door beyond, along the passage and so to that dingy office, from the open door of which a light streamed.

Scowling still, M'Ginnis strode in, then stood suddenly still, lifted his right hand toward his breast, then paused as Soapy, turning about in the swing chair, took a heavy,

ivory-handled revolver from where it had lain on the desk beside a packet of letters tied up in a faded blue ribbon.

"Lock th' door, Bud, lock th' door!" said he softly. "So!" he nodded, as M'Ginnis obeyed. "'N' say, Bud, take that hand away from y'r gun an' — keep it away — see?" And the lamplight glittered on the long barrel that rested on Soapy's knee.

"So — this is th' game — hey?" demanded M'Ginnis hoarsely, his bloodshot eyes fixed on Soapy unwinkingly.

"'S right, Bud. Y' see, I been takin' a peek int' that little tin safe o' yours — say, it looks like you 'd had a bit of a rough house, Bud!"

Soapy's cigarette quivered and was still again, while M'Ginnis watched him, breathing thickly but speaking no word, and Soapy went on again:

"I been takin' a peek into that little tin safe o' yours, an' I found some papers you 'd been kind o' treasurin' up about me, so I burnt 'em, Bud — not as they mattered very much, there ain't nobody t' worry when I snuff it — but I found as you 'd got other papers about other guys as would matter some t' them, I guess — so I burnt 'em too, Bud."

"Burnt 'em!" cried M'Ginnis in a strangled voice, "burnt 'em — you — "

"It ain't no use t' get riled, Bud; I burnt 'em — there 's th' ashes!"

M'Ginnis glanced at the heap of ash by the stove and burst into a frenzy of curses and fierce invective, while Soapy, lounging back in the chair, watched him unmoved until he had done, then he spoke again:

"Also I found — letters, Bud, a packet tied up in blue ribbon — an', Bud, they matter a whole lot. Here they are — look at 'em!"

For a moment Soapy's baleful eye turned aside to the desk as he reached for the letters, and in that moment M'Ginnis's pistol spoke, and Soapy, lurching sideways, sagged to his knees, his back against the desk. Again

and again M'Ginnis's weapon clicked, but no report followed, and Soapy slowly dragged himself to his feet. His cigarette fell and lay smouldering, and for a moment he stared at it; then he laughed softly and glanced at M'Ginnis.

"You fool, Bud, you dog-gone fool! Forgot t' load up y'r gun, eh? But I guess you got me all right, anyway — you 're shootin' better t'night than you did in the wood that time — eh, Bud? Now I want t' tell you — " He was choked suddenly with a ghastly coughing, and when he spoke again, his voice was fainter, and he held a smartly-bordered handkerchief to his mouth.

"They say God made this world, Bud — if He did, I guess He was asleep when you was made, Bud — anyway, remembering little Maggie, you ain't got no right to breathe any longer — so that 's for me — an' that 's for her!"

Lounging still, he fired twice from the hip and M'Ginnis, twisting upon his heels, fell and lay with his face at his slayer's feet. Then, spying the packet of letters that lay upon the grimy floor, Soapy stooped painfully and fired rapidly four times; when the smoke cleared, of those tear-blotted pages with their secret of a woman's anguish, there remained nothing but a charred piece of ribbon and a few smouldering fragments of paper. And now Soapy was seized with another fit of coughing, above which he heard hoarse shouts and hands that thundered at the door. Lazily he stood upon his feet, turned to glance from that scorched ribbon to the still form upon the floor and, lifting a lazy foot, ground his heel into that still face, then, crossing unsteadily to the door, unlocked it. Beyond was a crowd, very silent now, who drew back to give him way, but Soapy paused in the doorway and leaned there a moment.

"What 's doin'? " cried a voice.

"Say, run f'r a doctor, somebody — quick — Soapy 's hurt bad, I reckon — "

"Hurt? " said Soapy, in soft, lazy tones. "'S right!

But — say — fellers, there 's a son of a dog in there — waitin' f'r a spade — t' bury him!" Then Soapy laughed, choked, and groping before him blindly, staggered forward, and pitching sideways, fell with his head beneath a table and died there.

CHAPTER XLV

OF THE OLD UN AND FATE

Spike leaned back among his cushions and, glancing away across close-cropped lawns and shady walks, sighed luxuriously.

"Say, Ann," he remarked. "Gee whiz, Trapesy, there sure ain't no flies on this place of old Geoff's!"

"Flies," said Mrs. Trapes, glancing up from her household accounts, "you go into the kitchen an' look around."

"I mean it 's aces up."

"Up where?" queried Mrs. Trapes.

"Well, it 's a regular Jim-dandy cracker-jack — some swell clump, eh?"

"Arthur, that low, tough talk don't go with me," said Mrs. Trapes, and resumed her intricate calculations again.

"Say, when 'll Geoff an' Hermy be back?"

"Well, considerin' she 's gone to N' York t' buy more clo'es as she don't need, an' considerin' Mr. Ravenslee 's gone with her, I don't know."

"An' what you do know don't cut no ice. Anyway, I 'm gettin' lonesome."

"What, ain't I here?" demanded Mrs. Trapes sharply.

"Sure. I can't lose you!"

"Oh! Now I 'll tell you what it is, my good b'y —"

"Cheese it, Trapes, you make me tired, that 's what."

"If you sass me, I 'll box your young ears — an' that 's what!"

"I don't think!" added Spike. "Nobody ain't goin' t' box me. I 'm a sure enough invalid, and don't you forget it."

"My land!" exclaimed Mrs. Trapes, "a bit of a hole in his arm, that 's all."

"Well, I wish you got it, 'stead o' me — it smarts like sixty!"

"Shows it 's healin'. Doctor said as it 'll be well in a week."

"Doctor!" sniffed Spike, "he don't know what I suffer. I may be dyin' for all he knows."

"You are!" sighed Mrs. Trapes, with a gloomy nod.

"Eh — what?" exclaimed Spike, sitting up.

"So am I — we all are — by the minute. Every night we 're a day's march nearer home! So now jest set right there an' go on dyin', my b'y!"

"Say, now, cut it out," said Spike, wriggling. "That ain't no kind o' way t' cheer an invalid."

"It 's th' truth."

"Well, it don't cheer me more, so let 's have a lie for a change."

Mrs. Trapes snorted and fell to adding and subtracting busily.

"Say, Ann," said he after awhile, "if you got any more o' that punkin pie I could do some right now. I 'm hungry."

"It ain't eatin' time yet."

"But — Gee! ain't I a invalid?"

"Sure! Consequently you must be fed slow an' cautious."

"Oh, fudge! What 's th' good of a guy bein' a invalid if a guy can't feed when he wants to?"

"What 's a hundred an' ninety-one from twenty-three?" enquired Mrs. Trapes.

"Skidoo!" murmured Spike sulkily. But after Mrs. Trapes had subtracted and added busily he spoke again.

"You ain't such a bad old gink — sometimes," he conceded.

"Gink?" said Mrs. Trapes, glaring.

"I mean you can be a real daisy when you want to."

"Can I?"

"Sure! Sometimes you can be so kind an' nice I like you a whole lot!"

"Is that so?"

"You bet it is — honest Injun."

"Arthur, if it 's that pie you want — "

"It ain't!"

"Well, what is it?"

"How d' ye know I want anything?"

"Oh, I just guess, maybe."

"Well, say — if you could cop me one o' Geoff's cigarettes — one o' them with gold letterin' onto 'em — "

"You mean — thieve you one!"

"Why, no, a cigarette ain't thievin'. Say, now, dear old Trapesy, I 'm jest dyin' for a gasper!"

"Well, you go on dyin', an' I 'll set right here an' watch how you do it."

"If I was t' die you 'd be sorry for this, I reckon."

"Anyway, I 'd plant some flowers on you, my lad, an' keep your lonely grave nice — "

"Huh!" sniffed Spike, "a lot o' good that 'ud do me when I was busy pushin' up th' daisies. It 's what I want now that matters."

"An' what you want now, Arthur, is a rod of iron — good 'n' heavy. Discipline 's your cryin' need, an' you 're sure goin' t' get it."

"Oh? Where?"

"At college! My land, think of you at Yale or Harvard or C'lumbia — "

"Sure you can think; thinkin' can't cut no ice."

"Anyway, you 're goin' soon as you 're fit; Mr. Geoffrey says so."

"Oh, Geoff 's batty — he 's talkin' in his sleep. I ain't goin' t' no college — Geoff 's got sappy in th' bean — "

"Well, you tell him so."

"Sure thing — you watch me!"

"No, I 'll get you somethin' t' eat — some milk an' — "

"Say, what about that punkin pie?"

"You sit right there an' wait."

"Chin-Chin!" nodded Spike, and watched her into the house.

No sooner was he alone than he was out of his chair and, descending the steps into the garden, sped gleefully away across lawns and along winding paths, following a haphazard course. But, as he wandered thus, he came to the stables and so to a large building beyond, where were many automobiles of various patterns and make; and here, very busy with brushes, sponge, and water, washing a certain car and making a prodigious splashing, was a figure there was no mistaking, and one whom Spike hailed in joyous surprise.

"Well, well, if it ain't th' old Spider! Gee, but I 'm glad t' see you! Say, old sport, I 'm a invalid — pipe my bandages, will ye?"

"Huh!" grunted the Spider, without glancing up from the wheel he was washing.

"Say, old lad," continued Spike, "I guess they told you how I put it all over Bud, eh?"

"Mph!" said the Spider, slopping the water about.

"Heard how I saved old Geoff from gettin' snuffed out, did n't yer?"

"Huh-umph!" growled the Spider.

"That 's sure some car, eh? Gee, but it 's good t' see you again, anyway. How 'd you come here, Spider?"

"U-huh!" said the Spider.

"Say," exclaimed Spike, "quit makin' them noises an' say somethin', can't yer? If you can't talk t' a pal, I 'm goin'."

"Right-o, Kid!" said the Spider; "only see as you don't go sheddin' no more buttons around."

"B-buttons!" stammered Spike. "What yer mean? What buttons?"

The Old Un, who happened to have been dozing in the limousine that stood in a shady corner, sat up suddenly and blinked.

"Why, I mean," answered the Spider, wringing water from the sponge he held and speaking very deliberately,

"I mean the button as you — left behind you — in th' wood!"

Spike gasped and sat down weakly upon the running-board of a car, and the Old Un stole a furtive peep at him.

"So you — know —?"

"Sure I know — more 'n I want t' know about you, so — chase yourself out o' here — beat it!"

Spike stared in mute amazement, then flushed painfully.

"You mean — you an' me — ain't goin' t' be pals no longer?" he asked wistfully.

"That 's what!" nodded the Spider, without lifting his scowling gaze from the sponge. "Kid, I ain't no Gold-medal Sunday-school scholar nor I ain't never won no prizes at any Purity League conference, but there 's some guys too rotten even f'r me!"

"But I — I — saved his life, did n't I?"

"That ain't nothin' t' blow about after what you did in that wood. Oh, wake up an' see just how dirty an' rotten you are!"

Spike rose and stood, his hands tight-clenched, and though he tried to frown, he could n't hide the pitiful twitching of his lips nor the quaver in his voice.

"I guess you mean you 're goin' t' give me th' throw-down?"

"Well," answered the Spider, scowling at the sponge in his hand, "there 's jest two or three things as I ain't got no use for, an' one of 'em 's — murder!"

Hereupon Spike shrank away, and the Old Un, reaching out stealthily, opened the door of the limousine while the Spider fell to work again, splashing more than ever. Thus as Spike crept away with head a-droop, the Old Un, all unnoticed, stole after him, his old eyes very bright and birdlike, and, as he followed, keeping in the shade of hedge and tree as much as possible, he whispered a word to himself over and over again:

"Lorgorramighty!"

But Spike went on with dragging feet, ignorant that

any one followed, lost in a sudden sense of shame such as he had never known before — a shame that was an agony: for though his bodily eyes were blinded with bitter tears, the eyes of his mind were opened wide at last, and he saw himself foul and dirty, even as the Spider had said. So on stumbling feet Spike reached a shady, grassy corner remote from all chance of observation and, throwing himself down there, he lay with his face hidden, wetting the grass with the tears of his abasement.

When at last he raised his head, he beheld a little old man leaning patiently against a tree near by and watching him with a pair of baleful eyes.

"Hello!" said Spike wearily. "Who are you?"

"I 'm Fate, I am!" nodded the Old Un. "Persooin' Fate, that 's me."

"What yer here for, anyway?" enquired the lad, humble in his abasement.

"I 'm here to persoo!"

"Say, now, what 's your game; what yer want?"

"I want you, me lad."

"Well, say — beat it, please — I want t' be alone."

"Not much, me lad. I 'm Fate, I am, an' when Fate comes up agin murder, Fate ain't t' be shook off."

"Murder!" gasped Spike. "Oh, my God! I — I ain't — "

The lad sprang to his feet and was running on the instant, but turning to glance back, tripped over some obstacle and fell. Swaying he rose and stumbled on, but slower now by reason of the pain in his wounded arm. Thus, when at last he came out upon the road, the Old Un was still close behind him.

CHAPTER XLVI

IN WHICH GEOFFREY RAVENSLEE OBTAINS HIS OBJECT

Mrs. Trapes glanced sadly around her cosy housekeeper's room and sighed regretfully; she was alone, and upon the table ready to hand lay her neat bonnet, her umbrella, and a pair of white cotton gloves, beholding which articles her lips set more resolutely, her bony arms folded themselves more tightly, and she nodded in grim determination.

"The labourer is worthy of his hire!" she sighed, apparently addressing the bonnet, "but, if so be the labourer ain't worthy, why then, the sooner he quits —"

A sound of quick, light feet upon the stair and a voice that laughed gaily, a laugh so full of happiness that even Mrs. Trapes's iron features relaxed, and her grim mouth curved in her rare smile. At that moment the door opened and Hermione appeared, a radiant Hermione who clasped Mrs. Trapes in her arms and tangled her up in her long motor veil and laughed again.

"Oh, Ann, such a day!" she exclaimed, laying aside her long dust-coat. "New York is a paradise — when you 're rich! No more bargain days and clawing matches over the remnant counter, Ann! Oh, it 's wonderful to be able to buy anything I want — anything! Think of it, Ann, is n't it just a dream of joy? And I 've shopped and shopped, and he was so dear and patient! I bought Arthur a complete outfit —"

"Arthur!" said Mrs. Trapes, and groaned.

"And you, Ann, you dear thing, I bought you — guess what? But you never could! I bought you a gold watch, the very best I could find, and he bought you a chain for it, a long one to go around your dear neck, set with diamonds

and rubies, I mean the chain is — it 's the cutest thing, Ann! You remember you used to dream of a gold chain set with real diamonds, some day? Well, ' some day 's ' to-day, Ann."

" But — oh, Hermy, I — I — "

" He wants to give it you himself, because he says you 're the best friend he ever had and — oh, here he is! You did say so, did n't you, Geoffrey? "

" And I surely mean it! " answered Ravenslee, tossing his driving gauntlets into a chair, " though you certainly threw cold water upon my peanut barrow, did n't you, Mrs. Trapes? "

" Oh, Geoffrey, dear, do give her that precious package; I 'm dying to see her open it! "

So Ravenslee drew the jeweller's neat parcel from his pocket and put it into Mrs. Trapes's toil-worn hand. For a moment her bony fingers clutched it, then she sighed tremulously and, placing it on the table, rose and stood staring down at it. When at last she spoke, her voice was harsher than usual.

" Hermy, dear — I mean Mrs. Ravenslee, ma'am, I — can't — take 'em! "

" But, dear — why not? "

" Because they 're coals o' fire."

" But you must take them, dear; we bought them for you and — "

" Which jools, ma'am, I can in no wise accept."

" Why, Ann, dear, whatever — "

" Which jools, ma'am, having been a dream, must for me so remain, me not bein' faithful in my dooties to you an' Mr. Geoffrey. Consequently I begs to tender you now my resignation, yieldin' up my post in your service to one better worthy, and returnin' t' th' place wherefrom I come."

Here Mrs. Trapes put on her bonnet, setting it a little askew in her agitation.

" Th' labourer is worthy of his hire, but if he ain't — so be it! "

Here Mrs. Trapes tied her bonnet strings so tightly and with such resolute hands that she choked.

"Why, Ann dear," cried Hermione, "whatever do you mean? As if I could bear to part with you!" Here she untied the bonnet strings. "As if I could ever let you go back to Mulligan's!" Here she took off the bonnet. "As if I could ever forget all your tender love and care for me in the days when things were so hard and so very dark!" Here she tossed the bonnet into a corner.

"My land!" sighed Mrs. Trapes, "me best bonnet —"

"I know, Ann. I made it for you over a year ago, and it 's time you had another, anyway! Now, open that parcel — this minute!"

But instead of doing so, Mrs. Trapes sank down in the chair beside the table and bowed her head in her hands.

"Hermy," said she, "oh, my lamb, he 's gone! You left Arthur in my care an' — he 's gone, an' it 's my fault. Went away at five o'clock, an' here it is nigh on to ten — an' him sick! God knows I 've searched for him — tramped to th' ferry an' back, an' th' footmen they 've looked for him an' so have th' maids — but Arthur 's gone — an' it 's my fault! So, Hermy — my dear — blame me an' let me go —"

The harsh voice broke and, bowing her head, she sat silent, touching the unopened packet of jewellery with one long, bony finger.

"Why, Ann — dear Ann — you 're crying!" Hermione was down on her knees, had clasped that long bony figure in her arms. "You must n't, Ann, you must n't. I 'm sure it was n't your fault, so don't grieve, dear — there!" And she had drawn the disconsolate grey head down upon her shoulder and pillowed it there.

"But — oh, Hermy, he 's gone! An' you told me to — look after him."

"Ann, if Arthur meant to go, I 'm sure you could n't have prevented him; he is n't a child any longer, dear. There, be comforted — we 'll hunt for him in the car — won't we, Geoffrey?"

"Of course," nodded Ravenslee, "I 'll 'phone the garage right away."

But as he opened the door he came face to face with Joe, who touched an eyebrow and jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"S'cuse me, sir," said he, "but it 's that Old Un, covered wi' dust 'e is, sir, an' wants a word wi' you. And, sir, 'e 's that mysterious as never was. Shall I let him come in, sir?"

"You try an' keep me out, my lad, that 's all!" panted the Old Un, ducking under Joe's great arm, "I 'm a better man nor ever you 'll be!"

So saying, the Old Un hobbled forward and, sinking into the nearest armchair, fanned himself with his hat, which, like the rest of his garments, bore the dust of travel.

"Greetin's, Guv!" said he, when he had caught his breath. "'Ere I be — a old man as 'as done more for ye than all th' young 'uns put t'gether. Mrs. Ravenslee, ma'am, best respex!"

"And what have you been doing now?" enquired Ravenslee, smiling.

"Well, Guv, I been an' got th' murderer for ye, that 's all!"

Hermione caught her breath suddenly and gazed at the fierce, dusty old man with eyes full of growing terror; beholding which Ravenslee frowned, then laughed lightly and, seating himself on a corner of the table, swung his leg to and fro.

"So you 've found him out, have you, Old Un?"

"Ah, that I have!"

"Are you sure?"

"Ah, quite sure, Guv."

"Well, where is he — trot him out."

"'E 's comin' along — th' Spider 's bringin' un. Ye see, he 's a bit wore out same as I am — we been trampin' all th' arternoon. Look at me shoes, that 's th' worst o' patent leather — they shows th' dust. Joe, my lad, jest give 'em a flick over with ye wipe."

But at this moment steps were heard slowly approaching, and Hermione uttered an inarticulate cry, then spoke in an agonised whisper: "Arthur!"

Pallid of cheek and drooping of head Spike stood in the doorway, his shabby, threadbare clothes dusty and travel-stained, his slender shape encircled by the Spider's long arm. At Hermione's cry he lifted his head and looked up yearningly, his sensitive mouth quivered, his long-lashed eyes swam in sudden tears, he strove to speak but choked instead; then Ravenslee's calm, pleasant voice broke the painful silence.

"Old Un," said he, rising, "I understand you are fond of jam — well, from now on you shall bathe in it if you wish."

"Spoke like a true sport, Guv!"

"Why, you see, you have surely done me a very great service."

"Meanin' because I found ye th' murderer."

"Murderer?" exclaimed Ravenslee, staring.

"Why, yes — there 'e is!" and the old man pointed a long finger at the shrinking Spike.

"Old Un," said Ravenslee, shaking his head, "don't joke with me — "

"I — I ain't jokin', Guv," cried the Old Un, rising. "Why — oh, Lorgorramighty, you don't mean t' say as this ain't 'im? Why, 'e 's confessed, Guv; I 'eard 'im!"

Ravenslee smiled gently and shook his head again.

"But he has been sick, Old Un; he was hurt, you know, when he saved my life."

"But, Lord, Guv, if 'e 's confessed — "

"He has been sick, Old Un, and when we are sick the wisest of us are apt to say silly things — even I did, so they tell me."

"What?" quavered the old man, "ain't I — ain't I found no murderer for ye, arter all, Guv?"

"You 've done something much, very much better, Old Un — you 've found me my brother!"

"Brother!" echoed Spike, "brother? Oh, Geoff — "

he sighed deeply, and as Ravenslee crossed toward him he smiled wanly and sank swooning into the supporting arms of the Spider, who at a word from Hermione bore the boy up-stairs; but scarcely was he laid upon his bed than he opened his heavy eyes.

"Say, Spider," said he wearily, "old Geoff sure does play square — even to a worm like me — well, I guess! No, don't go yet, I want yer to hear me try to explain the kind o' dirty dog I been — I guess he won't want t' call me 'brother' after that; no, siree, he 'll cut me out same as you have an' serve me right too." Then turning toward where Ravenslee and Hermione stood he continued: "Geoff — Hermy, dear — ah, no, don't touch me, I ain't worth it. I 'm too dirty — Spider says so — an' I guess he 's right. Listen — I meant t' go away t'day an' leave you because I felt so mean, but th' old man followed me, an' I could n't run because my arm pained some — y' see, I fell on it. So I let him bring me back because I guess it 's up t' me t' let you know as I ain't fit t' be your brother, Geoff — or Hermy's." For a moment Spike paused, then with an effort he continued but kept his face averted. "Geoff, it was me — in the wood that time! Yes, it was me, an' I had a gun. I — I meant — t' do you in, Geoff — "

Spike's voice failed and he was silent again, plucking nervously at the sheet, while Hermione's proud head drooped and her hands clasped and wrung each other in an agony of shame; but to these painfully rigid hands came another hand, big and strong yet very gentle, at whose soothing touch those agonised fingers grew lax and soft, then clung to that strong hand in sudden, eager passion.

"Poor old Spike!" said Ravenslee, and his tone was as gentle as his touch.

"But — but, Geoff," stammered the boy. "I — oh, don't you see? I meant to — kill you?"

"Yes, I understand; you thought I deserved it — why?"

"Oh, I was crazy, I guess! Bud told me lies — an' I believed him — lies about you an' Hermy — he said — you 'd make Hermy go — the same road — little Maggie Finlay went — so I came t' kill you — "

"Spike, if you believed that, if you really believed that, I don't blame you for trying a shot — "

"But I did n't — I could n't! When I saw you sittin' there so unsuspectin', I just could n't do it — I tried to, but I could n't. An' somehow I dropped th' gun, an' then I heard a shot, an' when I looked up I saw you throw out your arms an' fall — my God, I 'll never forget that! Then I saw Bud starin' down at you an' th' pistol smokin' in his hand. I meant t' do it but I could n't, so Bud did it himself. I 'm as bad as him, I reckon, but it was Bud shot you — Soapy saw him an' knows it was Bud — ask Soapy. An' now I 've told you all; I guess I ain't fit t' stay here any longer."

Spike's voice choked upon a sob, he buried his face in the pillow, and so there fell a silence — a strange, tense hush, a pause so unexpected that he looked up and saw that Hermione's head was bowed no longer, but she stood, very proud and tall, gazing upon her husband, and in her eyes was a great and wondrous light; and as she looked on him so he gazed on her. They had no thought, no eyes for Spike just then, wherefore he hid his face again.

"I guess this about puts the kybosh on th' brother business!" he sighed miserably, "an' I sure ain't fit t' be th' Spider's pal, I reckon!"

But now the Spider spoke, rather quick and jerkily:

"Say, Kid — get onto this! I 'm takin' back — everything I says t' you t'day, see? Because, oh, well — I guess you 've sure woke up at last! So, Kid — give us your mitt!"

Eagerly Spike grasped the Spider's big fist, and they shook hands gravely and very deliberately, looking into each other's eyes the while. Then, still quick and jerkily, the Spider turned and hurried out of the room. Then Spike turned to Ravenslee.

"Geoff," he sighed, "I 'm not goin' to ask you to forgive me yet, I can't — I 'm goin' t' wait an' show you — "

But as he paused Ravenslee's hand was upon the lad's drooping shoulder.

"Arthur," said he, "from now on — from to-night — you are going to be my brother more than ever — a brother we shall both be proud of — what do you say? "

But Spike's eyes were wet, his mouth quivered, and instead of answering he buried his face in the pillow again.

"Say, Hermy," he mumbled, "take him away before I do th' tear-gushin' act! Take him down-stairs — give him a drink — light him a cigarette — kiss him! Only take him away before I get mushy. But, say — when I 'm in bed, you 'll — you 'll come an' — say good night like — like you used to, Hermy dear? "

Swiftly she stooped and kissed that curly head.

"I 'll come — oh, I 'll come, boy, dear! " she murmured, and left him with Mrs. Trapes.

Down-stairs the fire glowed, filling the room with shadows, and side by side they stood looking down into the heart of the fire and were silent awhile, and, though she was so near, he did n't touch her.

"So it was n't Arthur, after all! " he said at last.

"No," she answered softly, "it was n't Arthur — thank God! "

"Amen! " said he, so fervently that she glanced up at him swiftly, then looked into the fire again. Seeing how the colour deepened in her cheek, he came a little nearer; but still he did n't touch her; instead, he took out tobacco pouch and pipe and began to fill it with strangely clumsy fingers, and Hermione saw that his hands were trembling.

"Let me! " she said gently. So he surrendered pipe and pouch and, watching, saw that her hands trembled also; when at last she had filled the pipe, he took it and laid it on the table.

"Are n't you going to smoke, dear? "

"No, not now. You 'll remember that Arthur also suggested you should — "

"Give you something to drink!" she added a little breathlessly and crossed to the cellaret in the corner. "Will you have brandy and soda?"

"Thanks — yes — that will do," he answered absently, and when she dutifully brought the filled glass he took it and set it down untasted beside the pipe.

"Why, Geoffrey!" she said in murmurous surprise, "are n't you thirsty?"

"No, not now. You will probably remember that Arthur also suggested you should — "

"I know!" she breathed, "but, oh, Geoffrey, dear — wait — just a little longer."

"Why?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Because!" she answered, staring down at her clasped hands.

"Why?"

"Because, my Geoffrey, if — if I let myself — kiss you now, I — shall never be able to — tear myself away, and I must say good night to Arthur and — "

She paused as a knock sounded on the door, and Mrs. Trapes appeared.

"Why, dear land o' my fathers!" she exclaimed. "Ain't you had time t' take off your bonnet yet, Hermy?"

"Goodness me!" exclaimed Hermione, "I forgot it!" So saying, off it came, and there was the curl above her eyebrow more wantonly alluring than ever.

"An' there 's that blessed b'y," continued Mrs. Trapes, "a-layin' up-stairs yearnin' for you, Hermy, an' him s' pale an' gentle — God bless him! An' it now bein' exackly twenty-two an' a half minutes past 'leven by my beautiful new watch as ticks most musical! Time as you was in bed — both of you! an' that reminds me, Hermy, I sent your maid t' bed like you told me, an' with my own two hands I laid out one o' them lovely noo nightdresses — the one with the short sleeves an' lace as you showed me last night an' — Land sakes, she 's gone! Think o' that now — my, my! Mrs. Ravenslee 's wonderful quick an' light on her feet, Mr. Geoffrey!"

Here Mrs. Trapes raised the watch to her ear and hearkened to its tick again, smiling at Ravenslee's broad back as he turned to reach his glass.

"Them nightdresses," she sighed, "as is all fluffs an' frills an' openwork, may be all right when you 're young, but for true comfort give me — flannel, every time."

Here Ravenslee, in the act of sipping his brandy and soda, choked; when at last he glanced around, Mrs. Trapes was gone.

Then he drew a chair to the fire and, sitting down, took up his pipe and tried to light it, but Hermione's nervous white fingers had packed it too tightly for mortal suction, whereat he sighed and, yielding to the impossible, sat with it in his hand, lost in happy thought and waiting for the swift light footsteps he yearned to hear.

The clock in the hall without struck midnight, but long after the mellow chime had died away he sat there waiting; but the great house lay very still about him, and no sound broke the pervading quiet. Wherefore at last he grew restless, frowned at the dying fire, and his strong fingers clenched themselves fiercely about the pipe they still held.

All at once he started, rose to his feet, and turned toward the door eager-eyed, as a hand knocked softly; before he could speak it opened, and Mrs. Trapes reappeared; she was clad in a long flannel dressing gown, and as she paused in the shadows by the door he could vaguely define that she still held the precious watch to her ear.

"It do tick that musical," she said, "an' I can't sleep this night till I 've tried t' thank ye both for — for all your goodness to a lonely woman. Ah, Mr. Geoffrey, I guess th' day as you came seekin' lodgin's at my little flat was a good day for Ann Angelina Trapes — why, my land, Mr. Geoffrey — ain't Hermy here?"

"No," answered Ravenslee a little bitterly. "Oh, no, I 'm quite alone — as usual, Mrs. Trapes."

"Why, now, that 's queer!"

"How queer?"

"Because I 've jest been into her bedroom, an' there 's her things — except that nightdress — but she — ain't!"

"Not there? She must be! Did you look in — her bed?"

"Lord, Mr. Geoffrey — her bed ain't been tetched!"

"Then where in the world is she?"

"Well," said Mrs. Trapes, consulting her watch again, "it is now exactly fifteen and three-quarter minutes after midnight, so I guess she 's in bed somewhere. But this is a big house, an' there 's lots of bedrooms, so if I was you, I 'd go an' look — till I found her —"

Ravenslee was at the door so swiftly that Mrs. Trapes started, and she saw his eyes were very bright, and the hands he laid on her bony shoulders were quivering.

"Mrs. Trapes," said he, "I will!"

Then he stooped, very suddenly, and kissed the thin, grey hair above her grim eyebrow, and so — was gone.

"Find her?" mused Mrs. Trapes, glancing after him up the wide stairs. "Why, yes, I guess he will sure find her — where she should have been weeks ago. Lord, what a silly, beautiful, lovely thing love is!" and she stood awhile smiling down into the fire, and her smile was very tender.

Then she sighed, switched off the lights, and went softly away.

THE END

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